Between Boys: Fantasy of Male Homosexuality

in Boys’ Love, Mary Renault, and Marguerite Yourcenar

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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“Between Boys: Fantasy of Male Homosexuality in Boys’ Love, Mary Renault, and Marguerite Yourcenar” examines an unexpected kinship between Boys’ Love, a Japanese male-on-male romance genre, and literary works by Mary Renault and Marguerite Yourcenar, two mid-twentieth century authors who wrote about male homosexuality. Following Eve Sedgwick, who proposed that a “rich tradition of cross-gender inventions of homosexuality” should be studied separately from gay and lesbian literature, this dissertation examines male homoerotic fictions authored by women. These fictions foreground a disjunction between authorial and textual identities in gender and sexuality, and they have often been accused of inauthenticity, appropriation, and exploitation. This dissertation cuts through these critical impulses by suspending their attachment to identitarian thinking and a hierarchical understanding of political radicality in order to account for the seduction of fantasy in these texts.

Exploring narrative strategies, critical receptions, textual and extra-textual relationalities produced by the three bodies of works, this dissertation delineates a paradigm for reading cross-gender homoerotic texts that is neither gay nor queer, neither paranoid nor reparative, and instead focuses on fantasy and how it produces pleasure. Fantasy is used in two senses here: as a preoccupation with relationships in romantic fantasies and as a desire to depart from the here and now. By thinking through
both forms of fantasies, I examine the misalignments between identity and identifications in Boys’ Love, Renault’s historical novels about ancient Greece, and Yourcenar’s cross-identifications with gender, temporal, and cultural otherness. Close readings of not only the texts in question, but also discourses around them reveal erotic relationalities both within and outside of male homoerotic fantasies. The end of the dissertation reroutes my discussions back to Japan and debates about gay authenticity in order to foreground fantastical connections that would otherwise be overlooked in a reading that focuses more on identity than disidentifications, cross-identifications, and relationalities.
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Introduction: Shameful Pleasures

When I was a sixteen-year-old exploring her sexuality in Taiwan, I had an unquenchable thirst for representations of homosexuality, both gay and lesbian, in any media format. At a rental bookstore (rendered obsolete these days by the internet), I found a Japanese manga, translated into Mandarin Chinese, titled *When a Man Loves a Man*. This is it, I thought, one more book to add to my modest archive of gay empowerment. The reading experience, however, was bizarre. There was a lot of nonconsensual sex between the two men, who were supposed to be in love with each other. The characters insisted that they were not gay, and if they had not found each other, they would have gone back to women in a heartbeat. The women in question were portrayed as unintelligent creatures, whose sole purpose was to have sex with one of the men and then to be waved away, with disgust. The most disturbing part was that this was supposed to be a romantic story. This can’t be right, I thought to myself, both traumatized and intrigued. The year was 1999.

Later, as a wide-eyed undergraduate, I was eager to join the conversation about lesbian and gay identities, which was then in its beginning in Taiwan. I took courses in gay and lesbian studies, joined the lesbian student association, and took part in Gay Pride—like any other good lesbian. What was not so “good” about me was that I was also secretly obsessed with Boys’ Love (also known as BL), the genre that the disturbing
manga I read belongs to. Once I began reading Boys’ Love as a genre that claims no affinity to reality, it became strangely enticing. Love stories between beautiful boys or men, more than the conformist heterosexual romance and the progressive gay and lesbian novels, carried an aerial quality that took me away from the here and now.

Boys’ Love was an obsession I felt that I needed to hide, however, because reading romantic pornography about love between men was misaligned with who I thought I was, or who I wanted to be. My education in gay and lesbian and queer studies didn’t help me understand my passion for a genre that I realized was established by women but is often misogynistic, represents male homosexuality but has nothing to do with gay men, and has been prevalent since the 1990s but mentions next to nothing about the global gay rights movements that I studied.

When I visited Japan in the 2000s, I was overjoyed to find entire bookstores dedicated to Boys’ Love fanzines. I was bewildered, however, by a sign at the entrance: male customers are not welcome. Boys’ Love is all about fantasies of male bodies and of love between men, but it cannot be seen by actual men. The bookstore had the clandestine air of an underground society, an eagerness to hide from the public eye and most of all, to hide from the objects of its fantasy. I realized that my feelings of shame about reading the genre may not have been a personal one, but was instead shared across the fandom.
Shame is a social experience. Shame is felt on the skin: in contrast to guilt, which is a negative feeling about what one does, shame is about what one is. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes this conventional wisdom alongside her theorization of shame as a communication.\(^1\) Shame is about not being “good enough” in the eyes of others, as it is about aspiring to be better. The shame I felt as a BL reader was in relation to the community that I was a part of, and to the identity that I aspired to embody.

Shame is also a common experience in reading certain types of writing. Janice Radway describes shame as a shared sentiment among women who read romance.\(^2\) Readers she interviewed often found it necessary to hide their books, because the books are evidence of their “self-indulgence” and “‘hedonist’ behavior” (90).\(^3\) BL is romance fiction with a male homoerotic twist, and many women consume both genres.\(^4\) A genre

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\(^2\) Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. University of North Carolina Press, 1991 [1984]. Radway uses the word “shame” specifically to describe readers’ feelings toward their own “hedonist” behavior (90) and “embarrassment” about the books’ graphic nudity (104), but she also describes book-hiding as a common strategy for readers to avoid confrontation with spouses who disapprove of romance novels (87).  
like BL comes built-in with shame: it has no literary esteem and provides pleasure for
the self-indulgent.

But there was more to my shame than indulging myself in a guilty pleasure. I
was ashamed as a woman, and as a lesbian who read BL. In my mind, a feminist-minded
woman shouldn’t be reading a genre that is apparently misogynist, and a lesbian
shouldn’t be reading stories that exploit gays for fun. BL was a threat to my identity and
my relationality with that identity. Sedgwick says that shame makes identity at the same
time it thwarts identification.5 BL endangered my identification with the gay and lesbian
community, while it also consolidated my political aspiration to be a good subject.

This dissertation is, in part, a relic from my “good subject” phase. After I went to
graduate school, while it was perfectly acceptable to choose BL as a topic, I decided to
study Western lesbian literature that had an uncanny resemblance to BL. The authors I
encountered in my research included Mary Renault, Marguerite Yourcenar, Sylvia
Townsend Warner, Willa Cather, and Ivy Compton-Burnett. These were women who
had written about male homosexuality to various extents.6 Working on these literary
authors who were known to be either lesbian or bisexual was more comfortable than
studying BL, which was, at the bottom of my mind, still a source of shameful pleasures.

5 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, p. 36.
6 East-Asian literary authors who write in a similar capacity, such as the Japanese author Mori Mari, were
still too “close to home” to BL for me.
When studying these literary authors, however, BL continued to resurface as the return of the repressed. My shame constantly reminded me that there could be something “off” with my need to embody a legitimate identity in the first place. I also found a kinship to BL in many of the texts that I studied. In Mary Renault and Marguerite Yourcenar’s writings, which I examine in two separate chapters in this dissertation, I discovered a persistent desire to depart from the self and to approximate otherness. Disidentification and cross-identification, as I now call these movements in this dissertation, are also the core principles of BL as a genre. Like BL, Renault and Yourcenar’s texts generate a mode of desire that is incompatible with identitarian thinking and the imperatives of being a good political subject.

Fantasy is the name I gave to this mode of desire. I chose the word fantasy because of the rich array of its uses and connotations both in academic and ordinary discourses. It is at the same time a psychoanalytic term with definitions specific to different theorists, a loose category of popular genres that depart from realism in various degrees and aspects, and a common word used in ordinary conversations that often carry an emotional weight of shaming and incredulity. The word fantasy encompasses theoretical, literary, and ordinary dimensions, which are precisely the dimensions that I want this dissertation to explore.
In psychoanalysis, fantasy is functional to the subject’s preservation (Freud’s theory of fantasy as wish-fulfillment) or its constitution (Klein’s theory of object relations). In this dissertation, psychological fantasy appears more often in the sense of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis’ theory about fantasy as the mise-en-scène of desire. Instead of understanding fantasy as directed toward an object, Laplanche and Pontalis describe a dispersal of the subject onto fantasy as a setting. Fantasy, in this sense, is a desubjectivizing force that unsettles the subject/object binary. But fantasy as a psychoanalytic concept is also ordinary: instead of as a pathological state, fantasy is treated as an ordinary phenomenon that is part and parcel of the human psyche. It is this emphasis, in theoretical terms, that most interests me.

As a generic category, fantasy has been most tied to the multimedia franchises that dominate popular entertainment today: narratives that create fictional universes populated by mythical creatures and supernatural powers. Despite shared techniques in world-building, fantasy has been science fiction’s less respectable double: fantasy departs from realism without a serious political agenda. Even within the fantasy genre, there are hierarchies of literary value. Romantic fantasy, which is the fantasy genre that I

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7 Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality.” The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, vol. 49, no. 1, 1968, p. 1–18. In Laplanche and Pontalis’ formulation, the fantasizing subject “does not pursue the object or its sign…. [t]he subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question” (26-27).
discuss in this dissertation, is often located on the bottom rung of respectability. As do other fantasy genres, romantic fantasy departs from realist literature in its formulaic plotlines and stereotypes, but it is first and foremost a fantasy about relationships, and its escapist reputation is often earned through its relentless pursuit of pleasure at the expense of what is understood as literary value or progressive politics.

When the word fantasy appears in ordinary conversations, it is often equated with delusions or dreams and signifies a sense of unreality, unproductivity, and (sometimes prurient) pleasure. When used in this way in academic discourses, fantasy implies a contempt toward ungrounded speculations or outright falsehoods. Jacqueline Rose says that fantasy tends to be “excluded from the political rhetoric of the left,” because the connotations of fantasy include not being serious, relevant, or political enough. When critics describe an idea as someone’s fantasy, they mean that the idea does not fit into academic standards of a proper object.

This dissertation is particularly concerned with this negative connotation of fantasy as an ordinary word, as well as the negative evaluation of fantasy as a genre. The negativity of fantasy is almost as pervasive as its ordinariness: it is an ordinary phenomenon in psychoanalysis, a common word in the English language, and also a

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8 Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy*. Oxford University Press, 1996. Rose mentions assumptions about fantasy as being “not serious, not material, too flighty and hence not worth bothering about” (5).
wildly popular set of genres. The fact that this ordinary word carries numerous layers of negative implications manifests a deep-seated distrust of a departure from the mimetic model of writing and thinking in the English language. This departure produces discrepancies between the social, cultural, and political conditions that make the fantasies possible and the fictional worlds and relationalities that they conjure into being. Because of these discrepancies, fantasy is often made a bad object that is understood to be insincere, insignificant, and exploitative.

My concern with discrepancies and the negative connotations of fantasy is why words such as “misreading” and “misalignment” are central to my analyses throughout this dissertation. By highlighting the prefix “mis-,” I don’t intend to suggest that there is a correct way to read or to align oneself. Instead, I want to foreground what has been understood as the “wrong” way to read in order to disengage my project from those reliant on crystallized equations between identity, identification, and “appropriate” forms of pleasure. Indeed, I argue that it is often the “inappropriate” and “wrong” of the alignment that produces the pleasure of the texts that I study in this dissertation. By naming cross-category fantasies as misreading and misalignment, I suspend their negative connotations in order to examine what energies and pleasures these “misses” generate by deliberately being in the “wrong.”
In this dissertation, I also seek to suspend the binarism in which fantasy is routinely caught in both academic and ordinary discourses. Instead of overturning the high/low culture binary and arguing that romance is as valuable as more “serious” genres, I focus on how romantic fantasy functions and what constitutes its allure. Instead of either subscribing to or reversing the opposition between the fantastical and the political, I suspend the opposition by resisting the urge to equate the political with the realist, and the fantastical with the inconsequential. Fantasy is eventually a space of suspension, not of the real; it interrupts clear distinctions between the real and the fictional, the mimetic and the illusory, and the transformative and the reactionary. This fantasy space of suspension is both what this dissertation examines and where it situates itself.

Eventually, academic writing such as what this dissertation has done is itself a form of fantasy—a fantasy of what constitutes critical reading and writing and what they produce. My critical reading is as much a misreading as other critics’ reading, as is the fans’ reading and the author’s own self-diagnosis. All these readings involve fantastical investments in what the text is about, who the text is for, and what the text does. The political aspirations to discipline these definitions and boundaries and to safeguard a proper alignment are themselves fantasies of what the genre of critical labor is able to accomplish.
This dissertation is heavily indebted to Eve Sedgwick and her theories about identification and relationality. Sedgwick is another woman who wrote extensively about male homosexuality, only not in a literary, but a theoretical capacity. It was indeed Sedgwick who proposed “cross-gender inventions of homosexuality” as a body of work separate from gay and lesbian literary canons.\textsuperscript{9} Sedgwick hadn’t expanded upon this short piece, nor did she include herself in this “rich tradition,” of which she is surely a member. But it was her theoretical practice of cross-writing that made her, if not a bad subject, at least politically suspect to some critics. Because she was, in her own words, “a woman and a feminist writing… about male homosexuality,” Sedgwick’s relation to her object of study catalyzed a series of meta-theoretical debates about her authority to speak for a gender and sexuality to which she did not belong.\textsuperscript{10} The attacks launched against her were similar to the ones that both Renault and Yourcenar had been subjected to, and even more so for BL. If BL can be generalized to define the category of “women’s cross-writings about male homoeroticism,” Sedgwick’s works are “theoretical BL” that continue to challenge assumptions about identity and identification.

Chapter 1: Boys’ Love: The Fantasy of Male Homosexuality

Boys’ Love as a genre and as a subcultural phenomenon has been a strange beast in the academic world, vacillating as an object of study between fields such as East-Asian Studies and gender/sexuality studies, and between methods such as ethnography and textual analysis. Boys’ Love is as fascinating as it is perplexing: it depicts physical and emotional intimacy between men but is definitively non-gay, and its creators and consumers are mainly heterosexual women. Now often abbreviated as BL in Asian countries and in the U.S., Boys’ Love as an aesthetics originated in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s, at a time when Japanese society went through the turbulence of student movements, when women’s liberation movement began to gather momentum in Japan, and when shōjo manga (comics for girls) was established as a genre.

In the midst of drastic social change, male homoerotic romance (referred to as bishōnen manga—“beautiful boys manga”—at the time) for women emerged as an escapist genre in which teenage male characters fall in love with each other often in exotic European settings. Today, BL has become a commercial industry in Japan, and its products, aesthetics, and mode of production are spreading to other Asian countries, the U.S., and Europe. Despite its detractors, its lingering mysteries, and its initial geocultural limitations, Boys’ Love has become a global subculture in which women produce and
share both commercial and amateur *manga* and novels, and this phenomenon has inspired discussions both in popular culture and in academia.

Early scholarship on BL as a genre and its related subcultures tends to focus on BL as a uniquely Japanese phenomenon, emphasizing its origin in women’s relationship with patriarchy and the genre’s similarity with romance novels. While BL has been the occasional object of scholarly interest in East-Asian area studies, it didn’t come fully into the spotlight in U.S. academia until the 2000s. BL scholarship in the past two decades tends to be intersected by regional studies and gender/sexuality studies, which allows for an emphasis on the genre’s representation of sexual minorities. Coincidental with BL’s global dissemination, academic discourses on BL has largely moved from Japan to the world, and from gender to sexuality. “Queer” has been at the center of this contextual shift: while earlier works grappled with the tension between BL and feminist politics, later works have sought to understand BL by queering it.

This chapter examines the changing scholarship on BL in both Japan and the West to consider BL’s mechanism of desire, its position in gender and sexuality studies, and the colonial unconscious in queering an East-Asian subculture. More importantly, this chapter establishes BL as an interpretive lens for reading cross-writing texts.

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especially those by Mary Renault and Marguerite Yourcenar, which I examine in subsequent chapters. What Renault, Yourcenar, and BL have in common is women’s desire for the fantasy of male homosexuality. I argue that this mode of writing is textually traceable since mid-twentieth century, and has recently come to the forefront in popular culture because of the popularity (or notoriety) of BL and similar subcultures such as slash. It is now possible to discuss women’s male homoerotic writings in the language of gender and sexuality studies, even though the latter often appear to miss a crucial aspect of such writings—fantasy. By exploring BL’s ambivalent relationship with both feminist discourses and queer politics, I contend that a proposal of an interpretive strategy based on BL fantasy is indebted to but also in excess of both theoretical frameworks. To read through the BL lens is to take fantasy seriously—to come to terms with fantasy’s often conservative formulations of identity categories, its escapist tendencies, its disidentifications and cross-identifications, and to resist the temptation to sanitize these paradoxical tendencies.

**I. From Feminist Shelter to Queer Utopia: Reception History of Boys’ Love**

Dating back to the 1980s, the critical reception of BL as a genre has gone through a number of changes. While initial discussions were more or less limited to local Japanese critics, scholarship on BL has increasingly crossed regional boundaries, especially since the 2000s. The interpretive method has also largely shifted from feminist critique to queer analysis, with the focus moving from female readership to the
representation of nonnormative gender and sexuality. While feminist critics have conceptualized BL as a feminist sanctuary, where women can temporarily evade the damage inflicted by a heteronormative society, queer critics envision a queer utopia in BL, where gender and sexual norms are interrogated and transgressed. I would argue, however, that the underlying agenda of critique has not changed much: both feminist and queer interpretations of BL attempt to redeem the disreputable genre by reading radical political agency into its problematic texts.

Suspicious and redemptive impulses permeate both feminist and queer readings where the cross-writing genre is first established as politically suspect and potentially unfit for academic discourses, before it is redeemed by radical political interpretations. This argumentative move is not dissimilar to what Janice Radway describes as the ideal romance formula of redemption following denigration: the heroine is first deprived of social status, her relationship with the “aristocratic male” is antagonistic, and in the end, she is redeemed both socially and romantically. The romance of academic critique is often to put its object through this redemptive narrative for the object to eventually emerge as a proper, ideal heroine. In what follows, I trace the reception history of BL in both Japan and Western academia and examine the critical impulses and the narratives they construct for BL as a popular culture genre.

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BL is unique in its misalignments of identity, desire, and practice: not only does it celebrate male homoeroticism without gay male participation, it also tends to provide misogynistic portrayals of women or exclude them altogether, despite the fact that the majority of its creators and consumers are straight women. In terms of genre conventions, BL is a relatively new genre that has culminated in the Internet age, but it heavily relies on the conventional romance narrative—the formula of deprivation, conflict, and restoration—and has stayed away from challenges to heteronormative narrative put forth by both postmodern and queer writers. Politically, despite being contemporary with the development of global feminism, gay rights movement, and queer interventions into the discussion of gender and sexuality, BL has largely stayed on the outside of social, cultural, and political changes and challenges. Although critics have commented on the shifts that are gradually taking place in BL’s incorporation of social change and on the genre’s own changing readership, the premise of BL remains the same: a fantasy genre that resists social and political consequences of its desires and representations. Not only has BL not evolved into a “queer” genre or subculture, but contrary to recent critiques, BL in fact operates on the very opposite end of what queer represents and aspires to achieve in current academic and activist climates.

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3 The idea that BL has “evolved” with time and has become more aware of social reality, especially sexual minority issues, is the main argument in Mizoguchi Akiko’s 2016 book *BL shinkaron: bōizurabu ga shakai wo ugokasu* [The BL evolution: how boys’ love changes the society].
BL as genre and subculture has also struggled between the local and the global. While the origin of BL is firmly rooted in Japan’s literary and manga traditions, as James Welker points out, BL has also heavily borrowed from American and European aesthetics from the start. While historically, it was the generation of women manga artists (the Fabulous Forty-Niners) creating manga for women that jumpstarted the subgenre of BL in Japan, the idea of women creating male homoerotic texts for women also resonated with “slash” subculture in the West. Although the initial market of BL-related products, including fanzines (dōjinshi), manga, and novels were limited not only to Japan but to a coterie of Japanese women, since the 1990s, BL has become a multimedia industry whose products are distributed to Asia, the U.S., and Europe in both official translations and bootlegs.

The dissemination is also no longer unilateral: cultures outside of Japan have localized BL aesthetics, created their own set of languages pertaining to the subculture, and have been producing original contents that were exported back to Japan. While BL retains local specificities that are deeply rooted in the historical condition of women in Japan and in the creative community of women artists, it has also become a global

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5 In terms of language, Andrea Wood notes the mixed use of BL and “Yaoi” in U.S. publishers, which are usually distinguished in Japan between commercial products and amateur fanzines and the confusion of which is a U.S. phenomenon (407).
signifier of women’s fascination with male homoeroticism. Understanding BL requires attention not only to its locationality but also to its lack of it—to the mode of desire that it both reflects and produces across cultures.

In the strictest sense, Boys’ Love (bōizu rabu) in Japan refers to the commercially published novels, manga, and anime that entered the market in the 1990s. This chapter follows Mizoguchi Akiko’s use of BL in a broad sense, which extends its prehistory to the 1960s. In *BL shinkaron* [The BL evolution] (2016), Mizoguchi locates the origin of BL in Mori Mari’s male homoerotic novels and in *bishōnen manga* [beautiful boys manga], which covers the period between 1961 and 1978 (21). This is a period in which male homoerotic texts for women are permeated with a decadent style, and in which the positions of author/artist and reader/audience remained relatively separate. Following this prehistory is the founding of JUNE magazine in 1978, which was a women’s magazine devoted to male homoerotic art and novels, and the rise of *dōjinshi* (fanzine) subculture, often referred to in Japan as *yaoi*. Not only is the *yaoi dōjinshi* subculture

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6 In this chapter, Japanese names are presented in their original order (family names first) with the exception of publications in English in which author’s name is presented in the order of first name followed by family name.

7 There are disputes regarding whether or not to include Mori’s novels in the BL canon, and some critics attribute the origin of BL solely to the graphic tradition. Examples include but are not limited to Ishida Miki’s *Hisokana kyōiku* [The clandestine education] (2008) and Nishimura Mari’s *BL karuchāron* [On BL culture] (2015). Mizoguchi’s inclusion of Mori is in fact a less popular one.

8 Ueno Chizuko argues that even in these early *bishōnen manga*, there was hardly a traditional divide between author and reader. Instead, Ueno describes it as a “co-production” since readers were able to respond to the works in real time (126-27).

9 *Yaoi* is an acronym for “no climax, no point, no meaning” (*yamanashi, ochinashi, iminashi*), which refers to the pornographic focus of the fanzines. For example, Mark McLelland describes *yaoi dōjinshi* as tending to
comparable and concurrent with slash in the U.S., it also effectively established BL as a community that eradicates the distinction between creator, consumer, and distributor.

I use fans or fan participants hereon to describe those who create, consume, share, and fantasize about male homoeroticism in a BL context instead of traditional terms such as “author” or “reader/audience” because of the unique lack of distinction between these roles in this subculture. The idea of “prosumer,” often referred to as a new economic model of online content creation, and what Gabriella Lukács calls “fan entrepreneurs” are both helpful in conceptualizing a non-conventional reader/audience who also actively creates, circulates, and even profits from published content.10

Participation in a subculture such as Boys’ Love involves similar combinations of consumption, recreation, and circulation, but it also entails affective engagement with the material through fantasizing, socializing, and fantasizing socially with other fans. This affective engagement of BL fans is central to my argument about BL not just as a mode of reading but also as a rerouting of sociality through fantasy: women (re)creating and exchanging fantasies about love between men generates a unique subculture where male homoeroticism consolidates female homosocial/homoerotic bonding.

BL since the 1990s has opened up to both commercial and amateur distributions, to multimedia expressions, to both local and global markets, and as a recent phenomenon, BL has also begun to recognize more than the traditional straight women fan base.\(^{11}\) Despite its various moves to expand and diversify, however, BL still retains its identity as “women’s fantasy of male homoeroticism.” The way in which BL fan participants refer to themselves is one example: in Japanese the term is *fujoshi*, which is a wordplay that transforms the Japanese term for “ladies” into “rotten girls.”\(^{12}\) BL fans use the self-deprecating term “rotten” to describe themselves because they recognize what they practice—erotic fantasy that involves gender and sexual others—to be an abnormal and unseemly business. This is what ultimately distinguishes BL from “gay literature” despite their formal resemblance: both the creative process and the reading experience of BL are located on the outside looking in, with the shame and illicit thrill of a typical voyeur, no matter what actual participants occupy the subject position of the “rotten girl.” BL defines itself by a crossing-over to a position not of one’s own and a narrative that generates shameful pleasures through voyeurism and vicariousness.

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\(^{11}\) For discussions of the latest *fudanshi* [rotten boys] phenomenon, which involves straight men as self-declared BL fans, see Kazumi Nagaike, “Do Heterosexual Men Dream of Homosexual Men?: BL Fudanshi and Discourse on Male Feminization,” in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, edited by Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiro Suganuma, and James Welker, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015, 189-209.

\(^{12}\) For the etymology of the term, see Patrick Galbraith, “*Fujoshi*: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among ‘Rotten Girls’ in Contemporary Japan,” *Signs* 37(1), 2011, p. 211.
Feminist Readings of BL

In order to understand the mechanism of such a genre, especially its peculiar combination of straight women and male homoeroticism, early critics have adopted feminist interpretations of women’s social conditions reminiscent of romance novel studies. In Reading the Romance, the paradigmatic study of romance fiction readers, Janice Radway describes the function of the romance genre as “compensatory,” which is a semi-positive take on escapism (89). The women readers that Radway studied use the genre to “indulge in a fantasy that provides them with good feelings that seem to endure after they return to their roles as wives and mothers” (89). This is also the context in which early BL criticism situates its readers: as heterosexual women trapped in a patriarchal structure, and who adopt BL for the temporary release it provides from mundane responsibilities.

Kurihara Chiyo, for example, characterizes BL as a form of “shelter.” Using the metaphor of a Buddhist temple that had historically protected women from domestic violence in Japan, Kurihara describes BL fantasy as a place where “young women who are injured by modern society escape to unconsciously” (4). The idea of a romantic fantasy serving as a safe space that protects women readers and writers from the damages of gender inequality and oppression is similar to Radway’s, as is the tension

13 Kurihara Chiyo, Tanbi shōsetsu gei bungaku bukku gaido [Guidebook to tanbi novels and gay literature], 1993. The use of the word “shelter” to describe Kurihara’s temple metaphor is drawn from Mizoguchi Akiko’s BL shinkaron.
between this form of escapism and feminist agendas. While Radway recognizes romance reading as a “minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest,” she also emphasizes the need to create “a world where the vicarious pleasure supplied by [romance] reading would be unnecessary” (222).

In a parallel feminist call to action, Kurihara suggests that while a safe space is useful to heal the wounds inflicted by patriarchy, in the end it is necessary to dismantle the conditions upon which a shelter is made necessary for women by becoming an “activist that revolutionizes the world outside of the temple” (5). In both Radway’s and Kurihara’s arguments, romance novels and BL are first and foremost escapist fantasies, and although escapist fantasies are functional as temporary remedies, ultimately real social change needs to take place to eradicate the very need for escapism.

While understanding BL as an escapist genre characterizes part of its critical reception, this alone does not explain why heterosexual women choose male homosexuality as their object of fantasy over female homosexuality or heterosexuality, especially since the latter appears to be a more intuitive option provided by long-standing genres such as the Harlequin romance.14 Answering this question requires an exploration of the psychological mechanism and the subject positions that the experience of romance reading entails. Radway suggests that for heterosexual women to read

heterosexual romance, first of all there appears to be a “denial of the present,” and then there is also the “intense sense of relief [readers] experience by identifying with a heroine whose life does not resemble their own” (90). In Radway’s interpretation, the act of “identifying with” fictional characters, while affording readers narrative agency, does not provide agency in real life. On the contrary, identifying into an escapist text only takes the readers further away from their realities, leading to a denial of the here and now, which is made unbearable by patriarchal institutions, hence the desire to escape in the first place.

Similarly discussing the identificatory relationship between reader and the text, Ueno Chizuko, a founding figure of feminist scholarship in Japan, examines bishōnen manga in her 1998 book Hatsujō sōchi [The erotic device]. Bishōnen manga is usually designated as the predecessor to BL, and in Mizoguchi’s genealogy, bishōnen manga is located at the prehistory of BL in the 1970s and 1980s. Literally translated as “beautiful boys comics,” bishōnen manga was created by a group of women manga artists attributed to as “The Fabulous Forty-Niners” [hana no nijūyonen gumi] and was part of the movement that established shōjo manga [girls’ comics] as a genre. While today’s BL has exploded in variety and genre-breaking endeavors, the beautiful boys manga from the 1970s and the 1980s left a considerable stylistic and thematic impact on BL today,  

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15 The title Forty-Niners refers to the fact that all members were born around the year 1949. Members typically include Hagio Moto, Takemiya Keiko, Yamagishi Ryōko, and Oshima Yumiko.
including the visualization of the androgynous male body and the centrality of romantic love between men in narratives created and read by women.

In *Hatsujō sōchi*, as implied by the title, Ueno discusses male homoeroticism in *bishōnen manga* as a *sōchi* [device]: instead of focusing on the texts as representations of male homosexuality, Ueno understands love between boys in the *bishōnen* genre as a narrative device that channels women’s sexuality in ways specific to Japanese society at the time. Reading from a feminist perspective, Ueno interprets the genre as not just created by and for, but also about women and their desires, which had to be expressed strategically through a male homoerotic genre under the pressure of what Ueno calls “gender segregation” in Japanese culture (152).

According to Ueno, Japan in the 1970s and 1980s was “a world polluted by gender” [*seibetsu ni osensareta sekai*], to which Ueno appends the English phrase “gendered world” (132). Ueno’s peculiar translation of “gendered world” as “a world polluted by gender” portrays an environment in which gender itself becomes synonymous with gender binarism and inequality. The Japanese social construction of female sexuality also contributes to the inherent filthiness of gender: in this context, gender as an institution is not only oppressive, it is contaminating on a somatic level. *Bishōnen manga*, with its representation of androgyny and homoeroticism, serves as a line of flight for women to escape into a fantasy that allows them to temporarily depart from this pollution of gender.
According to Ueno, the *bishōnen* figure, who incorporates both an androgynous appearance and anatomical maleness, and whose romantic narrative involves predominantly other boys, is central to making the escape possible. The boy is a textual “device”—while his androgynous appearance encourages reader identification, his maleness also allows the reader to disidentify from him and to remain on the outside of the narrative, a position that Ueno describes as constituting a “privileged gaze” from the “safety in the audience seat” (131, 140, 154). Through disidentification with the *bishōnen*, women can depart from the “pollution” of gender, which not only demands Japanese women to conform to feminine stereotypes but also deprives their bodies of sexual agency.¹⁶ For *bishōnen manga* readers, full identification with the heroine and the escapism it promises for Radway’s romance readers appear to be insufficient. The “pollution of gender” means that identifying with a fictional female character creates an awareness of one’s own femaleness, which is a painful reminder of the reader’s reality. Instead, *bishōnen manga* offers beautiful boys whose objects of desire are other beautiful boys—a narrative space from which women are completely, and blissfully, excluded.

Using the example of Takemiya Keiko’s *Kaze to ki no uta* [The song of wind and trees] (1976-1984), Ueno explains that while the androgynous protagonist Gilbert serves as the projection of the readers’ ideal self and occupies the stereotypically feminine

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¹⁶ Ueno quotes Ōtsuka Eiji’s definition of *shōjo* from his book *Shōjo minzokugaku* [The Folklore of Girls] (Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 1989), where he comments that the young girl’s (*shōjo*) body is by definition prohibited from (sexual) use (Ueno 8).
position in the narrative (harassed, raped, forced into prostitution), his maleness prevents the readers from “identifying with” (dōitsu dōitsu) him and from perceiving the sexual violence inflicted upon him as on themselves (140; see fig.1). Ueno illustrates how the figure of the boy functions as a narrative device in the language of flight: “[The boy] is both a contraption to sever the self from the reality that drops low to the ground, and a safety device to operate sexuality as a hazardous object by cutting it off from the body. For girls, [bishōnen] provides the wings for them to fly” (131, my translation). In this scenario, if Radway’s readers take off from the ground along with the romance genre, Ueno’s readers similarly become afloat from the buoyancy of fantasy but choose to separate themselves from it midair. Readers of bishōnen manga thereby occupy a third space, which Ueno calls the “genderless world,” where “experiments in sex and love” can take place (133). This space is untouched by gender, a safe space that offers not only shelter but a sandbox in which to experiment with gender and sexuality, is made possible by the bishōnen’s maleness and his homosexuality.

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17 Ueno is not clear about why the “genderless world” is the “third” world, since she only distinguishes it from the “world polluted by gender” (132-33). Here I’m borrowing her use of the genderless world to explain the third space that readers occupy, which is distinguished from the reader’s reality and the fictional world of the bishōnen.
Figure 1: Rape scene from *Kaze to ki no uta* (1976-1984)
While James Welker interprets Gilbert in *Kaze to ki no uta* as genderqueer, Ueno reads Gilbert as a feminine/androgynous but male character. And Ueno’s reading is by no means applicable only to the *bishōnen* genre—the entire Boys’ Love market and the subculture is established on the provision that the characters are anatomically and indisputably male, no matter how they are portrayed aesthetically. And just as Ueno claims, the genre cannot function properly without this caveat about anatomical sex: the reader can properly “take off” from oppressive gender dichotomies only through disidentifying with the male character who both embodies and rejects her. The exit doors to a genderless fantasy are ironically labeled by anatomical sexes, and the sexes are only two: the oppositions that enable disidentification only come in pairs.

Ueno in fact states that the *bishōnen* embodies the “third sex,” a sex that combines femininity and male physicality and is neither male nor female (131). But I argue that from the mechanism of escape that she postulates, maleness, rather than a fantasy third-sex or transgenderism, is the driving force behind the *bishōnen* and later Boys’ Love universe. The fact that as a descendent of *bishōnen manga*, BL has evolved aesthetically and began to feature more masculine, sometimes hyper-masculine portrayal of

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19 There are in fact manga genres that depict transgender characters in erotic settings, and because of their mixed audience, it can sometimes be tricky to tell whether or not they are meant for women. But overall transgenderism has its own genre specifications, such as futanari (intersex), otokonoko or josoko (cross-dressing boys), and they are typically not labeled as “BL” per se. Cross-dressing is indeed a common theme in BL but it’s often depicted as a passing incident, an erotic event, rather than a thematic concern. Uli Meyer relates cross-dressing in BL to “forced sissification” in BDSM cultures and says it’s a “staple cliché” (236).
characters (see fig. 2) testifies to the idea that even though BL’s depiction of male sexuality is often nowhere near realistic, a fantasy of male anatomy and its dichotomous opposition to female anatomy is the cornerstone of Japanese women’s fantasy of male homoeroticism.
Figure 2: Kinniku BL [Muscle BL] (2016)
Bishōnen manga’s treatment of women also reinforces this dichotomy. Ueno is acutely aware of how escapism based on sexual difference between the character and the reader means for women’s relationship with their own sex. In a section titled “misogyny” (original text in English), Ueno laments bishōnen manga’s gruesome treatment of female characters “just because they are women” (146). In a fantasy predicated on the character belonging to a different sex than the reader’s own, the female sex is an intrusion from reality that disrupts the fantasy scenario. Ueno recognizes this idealization of the boy at the expense of femaleness as misogynistic, as an inability to love oneself as one is (143). Women’s misogyny, she argues, is a result of the systematic sexism in a patriarchal society, which makes misogyny a “centrifugal force” (enshinryoku 遠心力) for women to generate the necessary distance from gender stereotypes (143-46). Masochistic self-denigration for Ueno is therefore a necessary evil for a utopian fantasy of an ideal world. Instead of condemning the bishōnen genre for its misogyny, Ueno understands it as another “device,” just as the figure of the beautiful boy: bishōnen manga constructs a fantasy world not through mythical creatures or super powers, but through the manipulation of gender. More pragmatic than political, Ueno’s reading of the bishōnen genre also sets her apart from more recent critics of BL, who tend to read gender and sexual representations as more literally political.

BL as a genre has come a long way from women being consistently cast as villains and intruders on romantic narratives between men. But female characters
continue to be effective plot devices where their demise or departure is the condition of possibility for male homosexual unions; where their affection for the main characters is dismissed as complicit with heteronormativity, which helps the boys discover their true sexual orientation; where their undesirable femaleness serves as a foil to the attractiveness of the boys. Texts that don’t perpetuate these stereotypes either exclude female characters altogether or—as a new trend—represent them as fujoshi, participants themselves in the BL subculture. Fujoshi characters are the embodiment of the readers within the texts, whose interest in romance are strictly vicarious, and who therefore do not pose a threat to the central homoerotic narrative. The Madonna-or-whore formula in classic mainstream media has a new twist in BL: it is women who are perpetuating the stereotypes, only not to comply to heterosexist values but according to Ueno, to fight against it.

**Disidentifications**

José Esteban Muñoz’s 1999 book *Disidentifications* outlines disidentification as a strategy through which the minority subject negotiates mainstream stereotypes in the dominant culture. I translate Ueno’s description of reader’s ambivalent relationship with

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20 One example is *Boys be Tambitious* [shōnen yo tanbi wo kake], which is not strictly BL manga but is a yonkoma (four-cell) series about male high school students who draw BL manga. The metafictional nature of the series allows it to provide both a comedic portrayal of the reader’s own community (although in an all-male setting) and the conventional BL tropes (homoeroticism between male students in a high school background). The only female character, Koshimizu Shiori, is a tomboyish fujoshi who is passionately devoted to her BL hobbies. Koshimizu’s indifference toward romance in real life and her lack of conventional feminine markers is how the text prevents her from being intrusive in a BL narrative about BL.
the *bishōnen* character as “disidentification” because of the similarities this process shares with Muñoz’ queer concept of disidentification. For Muñoz, disidentification is identifying with a difference—neither embracing nor entirely rejecting the dominant stereotype. Instead, the minority subject, whom the dominant ideology fails to interpellate, identifies with the stereotype only partially and seeks to “transform a cultural logic from within” (11). Following Michel Pêcheux’s theory of subject formation, Muñoz proposes that disidentification is the “third mode of dealing with dominant ideology” besides identification and counteridentification (11). The partial identification that Muñoz describes resonates with Ueno’s *bishōnen* schema in that both suggest a process of subject formation that employs identification *strategically*: by identifying with mainstream representations with a twist, Muñoz’s queer subject constructs a “queer world” in which dominant culture can be reformulated and challenged, and by simultaneously identifying with the *bishōnen* and accentuating his difference from the self, Ueno’s girl readers are able to create a “genderless world” where they experiment with intimacy and desire free from the “pollution” of gender (Muñoz ix; Ueno 151).

The fundamental difference between Muñoz’s queer disidentification and Ueno’s genderless experiment, however, is the politics of the alternative “worlds” that they envision. Muñoz explains that even though the disidentification strategy can appear to be a middle ground between assimilation and antiassimilation, its underlying agenda is always antiassimilationist and radically political (18). His vision of a queer world is a
counterpublic sphere where political transformation takes place. Ueno also describes the “genderless world” in utopian terms: she defines *bishōnen manga* as an “experiment of sex and love in a genderless world,” which can be seen as the “grand theoretical agenda” underlying the innovative works by artists in the 1970s and 1980s (151). Yet not only is this genderless utopia firmly built on the anatomical determination of sexual binarism and the repudiation of the female, it is also an escapist fantasy that fails to anticipate or actively pursue social change. While escapism through male homoeroticism provides the freedom that readers desperately needed at a time of gender segregation and oppression, this freedom is always predicated on a care of the self that is paradoxically masochistic and self-obliterating. The theoretical visions in queer texts such as Muñoz’s cannot fully account for a fantasy genre that only appears to be queer: a queer reading would regard *bishōnen manga’s* self-contradictions as politically suspect, whereas a reading that centers on how the genre functions, such as Ueno’s, understands the contradictions as narrative devices.

The tension between a recognition of the value in escapist fantasy and a desire for political transformation is ultimately what’s problematic about feminist readings of escapist literature. Just as Radway envisions a world where the vicarious pleasure provided by romance novels is no longer needed (222), Ueno also places an endpoint on *bishōnen manga*. Ueno quotes from the novelist and critic Nakajima Azusa’s statement that “the age of the *bishōnen* is over” to explain that both the textual phenomenon and
the mechanism of desire associated with *bishōnen manga* were already a part of history at the time of her writing in 1998 (125-26, 153). The age of the *bishōnen* had come to an end, Ueno explains, because there was no longer a need for the androgynous boy to mediate between women and their own bodies and sexualities. In Ueno’s prediction, gender relations in Japanese society in the late 1990s have already evolved to the extent that *bishōnen manga* as a sanctuary will soon become obsolete. From a feminist viewpoint, escapist fantasy is an interim tactic that either eventually loses its utility (Ueno) or requires sustained resistance (Kurihara). What this type of politicized reading of popular culture misses is not only the resistance to change inherent in these genres, but also exactly what these genres do for their readers and fans.

In her review of *Reading the Romance*, Ien Ang comments on the “paralyzing opposition” between feminism and romance reading that she observes in Radway’s work (189). Ang points out that Radway’s work promotes a “restoration of feminist authority” that constructs “romance readers as embryonic feminists” (180, 185). The feminist critic perceives escapist fantasy as an unskillful strategy to solve the real problem of patriarchy, and this is how Kurihara and Ueno understand, although sympathetically, how BL fantasies functioned for women in the 1990s. Once the problem is resolved (and who wouldn’t want it to be?), the interim coping mechanism can disappear into history for real feminist literature to take place.
Ang suggests that what’s missing in this moralist account is “the pleurableness of the pleasure of romance reading” (185). If fantasy is taken seriously on its own, as a “necessary dimension of our psychical reality” rather than as “incorrect models of reality,” Ang contends, it is possible to recognize fantasy as rewarding and pleasurable in and of its own, regardless of its political function (187). In other words, to see fantasy as it is—as a pleasurable suspension of the opposition between the realist and the escapist—is a challenging task for feminist criticism. And as my next section demonstrates, suspending the critic’s politicizing and activist impulses remains challenging for queer readings of BL.

**Queer Readings of BL**

*Bishōnen manga* and The Fabulous Forty-Niners are indeed a thing of the past. But if *bishōnen manga* is placed in a continuity of an ever-expanding genre and subculture of women’s fantasy of male homoerotic narratives, then BL in a broader sense has not disappeared at all.\(^{21}\) Not only has BL not disappeared, it has made its way into more media manifestations, including TV animation, computer/mobile games, live-action movies, and BL-themed cafés. Not only has it spread beyond regional boundaries to Asia, Europe, and the U.S., but some of these regions are already creating original

\(^{21}\) This is precisely Mizoguchi’s argument in *BL shinkaron*: she uses BL to encompass *bishōnen manga* as prehistory to the post-1990s Boys’ Love, and argues that not only has BL as a genre and a subculture persisted throughout the 90s and to this day, it has in fact evolved with time as well.
content within the genre tradition. The Chinese hit Internet series *Shangyin* [Addicted] in 2016 and the Taiwanese Internet series *HIStory* in 2017 are among the most recent examples of texts that are produced outside of the Japanese BL industry but are also located squarely within the aesthetic and cultural traditions of the genre. To explain this persistence and expansion of a genre that was once declared dead by one of its earliest proponents (Nakajima), critics have shifted attention from treating BL as a resistance strategy to the genre’s unconventional gender and sexual representations, and from a strictly heterosexual female perspective to potential queerness.

Appropriate for a time when queer as an academic concept and discipline was moving from the margins to the mainstream, BL has been examined through the queer perspective since its debut in Western academic discussions. In the first published collection of essays on BL, *Boys’ Love Manga* (2008), nearly half of the articles examine the relationship between BL and queerness.22 As Uli Meyer explains in one of these articles, queerness is considered the most appropriate context in which to understand BL because BL as a subculture transgresses both gender and sexual boundaries (232-33). The author further suggests that “both BL studies and queer theory would gain from working more closely together” (233).

Exactly how is BL queer and how queer is BL? And more critically, what is queer in the BL context? What does it mean to apply queer as a Western academic concept to an East-Asian subculture in order to explain the latter’s textual mechanisms and political significance? Although there are subtle differences in the definition of queerness in recent BL criticism, critics generally use the word queer to refer to the academic movement since the 1990s that deconstructs identity categories. Fluidity, multiplicity, radical politics—without necessarily going deep into queer theory and its ramifications, these are the labels that allow critics to identify BL as queer. In these radical readings of BL, queerness has ironically become a label, an identity to be defended. Representations of non-binary gender and homosexuality qualify BL as queer, and being a queer genre implies that BL is more transgressive and revolutionary than it appears to be. But the most important “identity” of queerness in BL criticism is exactly what it is not: queerness is not part of BL’s own textual-political universe. Similar to retroactive queer reading of literary classics, queerness needs to be read into BL to establish the latter as a worthy academic object in sexuality studies. When applied to BL, however, this “queer reading” not only risks overlooking what BL does for its fans, but also risks reifying the very idea of queerness.

In Japan, the word queer in its activist and academic sense was introduced as a conceptual import in the late 1990s. Fushimi Noriaki, who edited the *Kuia Japan* [Queer Japan] magazine series (1999-2001), was among the major critics to have popularized the
use of queer. While both Fushimi and Takemura Kazuko suggested the Japanese term *hentai* (pervert/perversion) as a translation for queer, queer has most commonly been used in Japan in the form of *katakana*, a transliteration of foreign loan words and phrases. Today, the *katakana* form of queer is used in LGBT communities in Japan, often in conjunction and sometimes interchangeable with terms like LGBT, *sekumai* (abbreviation of sexual minority), or *x-jendā* (x-gender, a loan word with a local modification). Despite its lack of visibility in mainstream Japanese culture, queer as a sexual-political concept and an identity label is well-known to both scholars and LGBT communities in Japan. But the same cannot be said about BL communities.

To claim that a particular genre/subculture is queer already implies that it does not appear so. Reading about how critics justify their definition of a genre/subculture that appears to be distant from queer politics as queer reveals how they define the boundaries of queerness. What is “counted” as queer and what is not? Can a genre with creators and readers of heteronormative identities and where the depiction of sexual dissidence is predicated on the erasure, even denigration of those identities be “queer”? And what is the use of reading something as queer in the first place?

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23 According to S. P. F. Dale, the use of the term *x-jendā* is currently limited to Japan although it ostensibly contains the loan word “gender.” *X-jendā* is “generally understood to refer to a gender identity that is neither female nor male” in Japanese queer communities, although the term’s definition remains ambiguous and open to personal and contextual interpretations. S. P. F. Dale, “*X-jendā*” (Keyword), *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (May 2014), 270.
One familiar way to define BL as queer is to read BL’s representation of gender and sexuality as antiheteronormative. Similar to Ueno’s reading of the *bishōnen* as “the third gender,” with both male anatomy and feminine dispositions, recent critics have defined characters in BL as queer through close readings of the genre’s aesthetics. For example, in his 2006 article, James Welker performs a visual analysis of Gilbert’s genitals in *Kaze to ki no uta*, where Gilbert and other male characters’ genitals are never clearly drawn. Welker concludes that since “the penis is most conspicuous in its absence… the representations of Gilbert tend to be nebulous enough to allow readers to see a vulva if they so desire” (848-49). Welker is straightforward in saying that the beautiful boy archetype “seems a queer character indeed” since he is neither male nor female and exists outside of “the heteropatriarchal world inhabited by his readers” (842). In this line of argument, characters in BL (either the earlier *bishōnen* archetype or in recent derivations) can practically be read as any gender and any sexuality. It is indeed possible for Welker to also read the *bishōnen* as a lesbian: “regardless of whether he is read as a boy or girl, the beautiful boy can be read as a lesbian,” who is a “narrative outlaw” (865). By using the *shōjo* manga aesthetics of the 1970s as evidence for gender fluidity, Welker claims that readers can identify with the *bishōnen* as “boys, girls, or androgynes,” through which readers are encouraged to experiment with nonhegemonic gender and sexual practices” (855).
While Welker’s analysis of the ambiguity of Gilbert’s genitals may stand for some bishōnen manga in the 70s and 80s, in the same continuum, BL manga and yaoi fanzines since the 90s have evolved in aesthetics. While it depends on individual artist’s style, there is in general an overabundance of penises in BL works in the past two decades, to the point that it is no longer possible to identify the sexual anatomy of the characters as anything other than male (see fig. 3). Unless a clean break between bishōnen manga and the later BL and yaoi fanzines can be made, the freedom to “en-gender” or “de-gender” that Welker describes (849) does not stand for the greater genre/subculture as a whole. Even when bishōnen manga is read on its own, it remains problematic as to whether reading the beautiful boy as a girl, as a lesbian, as androgynous, and as a “symbol of liberation” (865-66) was a common practice among bishōnen manga’s actual readers. It is certainly within the realms of possibility to read the bishōnen as queer (which appears to mean gender fluidity in Welker’s article)—but is it how most BL participants read him? And why define such a character as queer?
Figure 3: Sex scene from Shimizu Yuki’s *Kachō fūgetsu* [Flowers, birds, wind, and the moon] (2014)\textsuperscript{24}
While Welker’s claim that the beautiful boy can be read as a lesbian refers to Judith Roof’s theory about a resistant narrative position rather than actual lesbianism, other critics have in fact commented on how lesbianism can indeed be read into BL texts. Andrea Wood, for example, argues that lesbian desire is already encoded within BL characters (399). Drawing from a BL manga published in 2000, Wood describes the characters as bearing “butch-femme/femme-butch physiognomy” that “speaks not only to possible lesbian desires and fantasies, but also other queer, transgender, and transsexual ones” (399-400). This search for feminine masculinity or queerness within manga aesthetics tends to ignore the complex ways in which gender in manga is encoded. The *bishōnen* or BL characters can appear to be feminine if compared to male characters, say, in U.S. superhero comics, but it is doubtful that they would be read as feminine, even as *female* (as Welker suggests) in the context of Japanese manga, and more specifically, Japanese girls’ comics. BL manga has its own set of conventions that can generally be seen as congruent with girls’ comics (*shōjo manga*) but expands upon it to highlight the subtle power dynamic between the active and passive characters.

It can indeed be said that there are distinctions between more masculine and more feminine male characters in BL, but that distinction is part of the genre convention, where the characters are read definitively as men. The sheer width of possibilities that

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24 In the two cells on the bottom, the character’s genitalia can clearly be seen.
critics perceive in BL—the beautiful boys as male/female/androgynous and the desires they elicit as lesbian/queer/transgender—invalidates the narrative mechanism played by male homoeroticism in the genre. Going back to Ueno, if the boy can indeed be read as any gender to the reader’s desire, the mechanism of escape would cease to function, since the genre is predicated on the binary opposition between the character and the fan’s gender positions.

In a 2016 article, Rio Otomo also reads BL as a queer genre, but she does so through rehearsing many of Ueno’s arguments about bishōnen manga and providing new interpretations about BL’s disidentificatory mechanism. Writing in the 2000s, Otomo connects bishōnen manga of the 1970s to today’s BL and treats them as a continuum that produces new meaning along the way with essentially the same mechanism of fantasy. Like Ueno, Otomo discusses escaping from the female body as the major function of the male homoerotic genre. But instead of masochistic self-love, Otomo describes the mechanism as autoeroticism. True to the participatory subculture that she discusses, Otomo delivers her analysis in the form of a confessional manifesto about the experience of the BL reader:

I am, thus, autoerotic, but my (female) body is erased in this process. Fantasy... tells me a story in which I am everywhere. In BL texts, I am simultaneously the character’s downcast eyes; the texture of the velvet couch he lounges on; the windows that fling open; and the wind that blows his curly locks.... In reading like this, no single identification takes place.... The subject ‘I’ as the unified center no longer exists in this activity.... I have forgotten my gendered body. The reading subject is not born here, but disappears, as my autoerotic pleasure peculiarly excludes myself along with my body. (148-49)
Otomo departs from Ueno’s feminist reading through her understanding of BL fantasy as desubjectivized autoerotism. While Ueno’s female reader appears to be coerced into self-inflicted misogyny in order to escape from misogyny, Otomo’s reader takes pleasure not in the persistent injury of the feminine self, but in the dissolution of the reading subject. Instead of debating if the reader identifies, counteridentifies, or disidentifies with the beautiful boy, Otomo argues that the reader’s identification is multiplied onto the mise-en-scène, resulting in a disembodied experience in which the gendered body is “forgotten.” Instead of the bloody image of axing the sexed female body to escape the pollution of gender, Otomo’s escapism is a simple forgetting.

What Otomo describes as the pleasure in the “disappearance of the ‘I’” is reminiscent of the Foucauldian idea of desubjectivation and more broadly, the deconstruction of the humanist subject in critical theory. Otomo herself connects her idea of the erasure of the subject to queer theory based on the “floating away from a fixed identity,” which she understands to be a liberating concept with utopian potentials (148). While Otomo’s understanding of fantasy as desubjectivation is fascinating, her labeling of this experience of BL fans as queer is problematic. Desubjectivation in its theoretical manifestations in queer theory, such as Lee Edelman’s theory of self-annihilating jouissance, are located in the context of deconstructing a Western modern subject. Whether or not the shattering of a Japanese female subject who obtains pleasure in the erasure of “the phantom woman, the ghost of patriarchy” (Otomo 149) is as
“liberating” in the same sense as a gay white theorist pulling subjectivity off its enlightenment pedestal is at best questionable. This is especially so because the Oriental woman is precisely what the Western, male-dominant theories tend to erase and silence.

Otomo is aware of the gender and racial dynamics underlying her formulation of desubjectivation when she draws a comparison between the BL anti-subject and the Japanese author Mishima Yukio. She argues that while Mishima and the BL genre both engage in textual autoeroticism, the former represents a “modernist project of making a case for the existence of a Japanese (male) subject who knows himself” (146). BL readers, on the other hand, are “outside the paradigm of modernity” since they refuse subjectivity along with the gendered body (146). Here, Otomo appears to be describing an Orientalist relationship between Japan and “the West” that is intersected by gender: while Mishima represents the Japanese (gay) man who seeks membership in the Western enlightenment subject, the escapist female readers of BL are excluded/exclude themselves from that membership. The deconstruction of the Japanese (straight) female subject, arguably before she establishes a modern political subjectivity, is the curious strategy of resistance to the “ghost of patriarchy” that Otomo proposes.

For Otomo, what eventually ties BL to queer is the utopian tendencies and potentials for political transformation that she sees in BL as an escapist fantasy. She elides the common assumption that escapism is inherently apolitical and even damaging to possibilities of political action by making a matter-of-fact correlation between fantasy,
transformation, and political change. She proposes that resistance through escapism is the “significant political contribution” of BL as a fantasy genre (148-49). Simply by allowing the readers a respite from the reality of patriarchal oppressions, and by providing women a narrative in which to “forget their gendered body,” BL is queer because it dismantles identity categories into fluid identifications. This is in fact not an unfamiliar line of argument in recent BL criticism, especially in critics trained in gender and sexuality studies in the West.

By reading BL as queer, critics like Otomo and Welker portray queerness itself as a fantasy through which liberation without context, locationality, and power negotiations is possible. Queerness in this sense connotes a fluid openness where any interpretation goes and the more radical, more transgressive ones are better for uplifting the objects in question. The seduction of applying a Western radical theory to an East-Asian genre and subculture is also evident: it is through queering BL that the genre made its way into Western academic discourses. Queer critique as an intellectual currency has turned BL into a spectacle: familiar radicality hiding in plain sight in one of the most conservative of modern societies.

In her article, Otomo does not make a distinction between fantasy and the more valorized genre of utopian literature, which is usually associated with social satire and unlike fantasy, has always been considered a political genre.
**II. Kizuna, Shipping, and the Erotic Triangle: The Case for Relationality**

While I am against defining BL as queer in a way that both misreads the genre and flattens queerness into a label and an identity, there is an aspect of BL that is generative, although not in the proper sense understood by radical political discourses. More specifically, this aspect is about what BL does: the kind of relationalities it creates, both within and without the texts. Instead of searching for queerness in representations, if queerness in its less ontologized, conformist sense exists anywhere in BL, it is in these relationalities. Within BL texts, there is an obsession with the erotic relationship between same-sex characters; outside the texts, the (arguably erotic) relationship between women who thrive off each other’s sexual fantasies is what allows the BL community to survive beyond the age of “gender pollution.”

BL as a subculture is excessively concerned with relationality. In slash subcultures, “shipping” is the raison d’être of fan fictions and is abbreviated from “relationship” being used as a verb, meaning a preference for a specific romantic coupling (as in “I ship Harry and Draco”). Similarly, BL is a fantasy about relationships. In BL, as in slash, the relationships in question are always the erotic possibilities between men—how they meet, how they interact with each other, how they fall in love, how they position their own relationship in a homophobic world, and what positions they take in bed. This eroticization of the mundane, or more precisely, of the homosocial—is according to Henry Jenkins the re-construction of a “continuum between
homosocial and homosexual desire,” a continuum that Eve Sedgwick theorizes to have been broken by modern heteronormativity (210).

Outside the textual space of BL, a different kind of relationality also forms among the (re)creation, circulation, and collective fantasizing of the fans. The community of women (or fujoshi-identified fans) constitutes a separate relationality that contains and traffics the textual relationality between fictional boys. Again expanding upon Sedgwick’s theory, Japanese critic Azuma Sonoko describes this as a reverse erotic triangle where female homosociality is established upon the exchange of male homoeroticism. It is in this reworking and remixing of Eve Sedgwick’s famous thesis on male homosocial desire in a subcultural setting that BL generates a momentum that is nothing like a proper revolution, but which unsettles the fantasy of heteronormativity by fantasy itself.

In what follows, I trace critics’ appropriations of the Sedgwickian thesis to understand BL, and examine how relationalities in BL intersect in and out of the text. My objective is not to define BL as queer via Sedgwick, but to explore what BL as fantasy actively does—generating relations—and to understand the consequences of these actions.

**Relationality Between Men**

In his 1992 analysis of fan culture in the U.S., *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins examines the structure of slash fantasy through Eve
Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theorization of male homosocial desire. While Sedgwick’s groundbreaking *Between Men* examines the rupture between the homosocial and the homosexual in modern Western societies, Jenkins posits that slash, with its preoccupation with eroticizing male friendships, both utilizes and heals the rupture in its romantic fantasies. Sedgwick proposes in her book that to “draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic… is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (1). According to Jenkins, slash not only does just that—drawing the homosocial back into the orbit of desire—but also generates pleasure in the process.

Explaining why slash fantasies often feature characters who did not previously identify as gay, Jenkins contends that without the injunction against homosexuality, the dramatic tension in re-establishing the lost continuum between homosocial and homosexual would not be as intense: “the barriers between men must be intensified to increase the drama of their shattering; the introduction of sexual taboos requires greater trust and intimacy between the men before they can be overcome” (210-11). While Sedgwick’s project is a literary-theoretical-political one that exposes the homophobic structure in the disruption between male homosociality and homosexuality, the project of slash (and BL) is one of pleasure, where participants dismantle the barrier between male bonding and male bonking not (only) for the sake of the latter, but for the dramatic
intensity generated in the process. In other words, slash and BL fantasies perform Sedgwick’s queer theoretical work purely for the sake of narrative pleasure.

While Jenkins’ adaptation of Sedgwick’s theory works for slash since the subculture rewrites male friendships and sometimes rivalries in otherwise “innocent” mainstream texts into male homoerotic narratives, the argument applies to BL as well. BL in the broad sense already includes fanzine culture (yaoi dōjinshi), which, like slash, appropriates popular manga or anime series that neither contain gay characters nor are intended for homoerotic interpretations. A look at the dōjinshi sales ranking on the popular Toranoana (Japanese manga store that also sells dōjinshi) website reveals the current trend in BL: among the top 50 dōjinshi, the vast majority are based on texts that depict male friendship, brotherly love, and male loyalty, only one of them contains explicit references to male homosexuality.26 The main interest of Japan’s dōjinshi is precisely on foregrounding the continuum between male homosociality and homosexuality, about the pleasure in breaking down the heteronormative barrier between the two.

26 Among the top 50 dōjinshi, 24 are on Osomatsu san (Mr. Osomatsu, a 2015 anime series based on a 1962 manga series by Fujio Akatsuka), 16 are on Tōken ranbu (Wild Dance of Swords, 2015 video game adapted to 2016 anime series), 9 are on Meitantei Conan (Detective Conan, an ongoing manga and anime series since 1994). The one that could be said to contain homosexual elements (although very subtly hinted at) is Yuri!!! On Ice, a 2016 anime series about male figure skaters that carefully blur the line among friendship, mentorship, and erotic love between male characters. For the ranking page, see http://www.toranoana.jp/bl/cot/pagekit/0000/00/07/000000072528/index3.html
Although original BL texts do not perform the appropriative twist on mainstream texts in slash or yaoi, they still incorporate the process of breaking down the social-sexual barrier within the narratives. As Jenkins observes in slash texts, it is also a long-standing BL convention to have characters who are not gay fall in love with each other. Mizoguchi investigates the convention extensively in *BL shinkaron*, where she states that BL texts before the year 2000 mostly conformed to the formula of the characters insisting that they are not gay, even after they have entered romantic relationships with men (56). While Jenkins is more forgiving towards this phenomenon, saying that “[t]his convention may not be so much homophobic (though it is often that) as it represents the power of homophobia” (211), Mizoguchi unambiguously defines this convention as not only a result of the texts embracing homophobia, but evidence that the texts themselves are involved in the reproduction of homophobia (60).

Mizoguchi explains, similar to Jenkins’ argument, that the “not gay, but...” convention is partly a result of homoeroticism being used as a narrative device, and the stronger the resistance against the consummation of the relationship, the purer and more dramatic the romantic narrative becomes (59). But to the core of this BL formula is a faith in what Mizoguchi calls the “ultimate couple myth”: a heteronormative elevation of the value of monogamy to the point where the characters are not only “not gay, they are not even straight. They are believers in the ‘ultimate couple myth’ and their sexuality is defined within that myth” (60).
Reading BL’s textual relationality as queer is therefore a double-sided sword: while BL’s preoccupation with turning male homosociality into male homosexuality coincides with the Sedgwickian project of queer reading, BL is not an antihomophobic project as Sedgwick’s work inherently purports. Not only is BL not antihomophobic, as Mizoguchi warns, BL fantasies about queering straight men can in fact perpetuate homophobia in the guise of homoeroticism and romantic monogamy. While twisting heterosexual, even heteronormative texts into homoerotic narratives provides the pleasure of subversive appropriation, the need for heteronormativity to exist in the first place for the pleasure to occur is going alarmingly against the queer agenda. The glorification of monogamous love as an alibi for gayness, to the exclusion of all other forms of relationships, also appears to be more collusive than recalcitrant towards heteronormativity.

The central argument of Mizoguchi’s book is that BL as a genre has evolved, that the homophobia she observes belong more to the pre-2000s period and that BL texts in the past two decades have largely revised older conventions, especially regarding gender and sexuality (136-37). But old BL lingers—and the fact that BL has not “evolved” into gay literature indicates that the distinction between the two resides beyond their separate aesthetic styles. Although BL texts are indeed moving in the direction of awareness and responsiveness to real world politics, and individual works that challenge conventions do exist, doing a queer reading on BL inevitably stumbles
upon heteronormativity that not only lingers, but serves as the foundation of the entire romance formula. To withhold the impulse to call queer on BL and the subsequent gratification of having found a proper object is perhaps the biggest challenge in studying a genre where men are bonking each other on every page.

**Relationality Between Women**

In addition to the concern with relationality within the text, another form of relationality exists outside, or more accurately, across the BL text. Joanna Russ’ famous epithet for slash—“pornography by women, for women, with love”—already hints at the erotic potential that slash facilitates for the relationship between women. In a genre where women produce erotic content expressly with women readers in mind, and where the readers are then inspired to adapt, recreate, and generate new erotic fantasies that energize the community at large, it is limiting to define the women involved as heterosexual simply by their relationship with the male figures on the page.

In *BL shinkaron*, Mizoguchi characterizes this relationship between women participants in BL subculture as unproblematically erotic. She calls BL a “virtual lesbian space” in which “sexual intercourse of the mind” takes place among participants (212). This is especially the case because of the lack of distinction between creator and consumer in the community—BL writers and readers are interchangeable and are both providers of each other’s pleasure, so the erotic exchange isn’t a one-way street. While romance fiction or erotic fiction for women in general could be said to constitute a
similar eroticism (while the content may be heterosexual, the production of desire is female homoerotic), there isn’t an equivalent amount of mutual exchange established in a community where producing, consuming, and sharing are not fixed to particular agents.27

Mizoguchi’s proposal to read the relationship between fujoshi as a lesbian one is unprecedented in BL studies in Japan, and is a result of the rare intersection between lesbian/gay studies and BL studies that she embodies in Japanese scholarship on both genres. This intersection is not a rare one in Western scholarship on BL. I would in fact describe reading BL through the critical and political lens of lesbian/gay and queer studies as the mainstream in Western BL studies at this moment. As an openly lesbian scholar who studied gay and lesbian studies in the United States, Mizoguchi represents a departure from Japanese studies of BL that focuses on straight women’s tortuous relationship with heterosexual desire.

While Mizoguchi also discusses BL as an escape mechanism for straight women in BL shinkaron, her central argument is that not only has BL become more aware of the social reality of minority sexualities since around the 2000s, but that the relationship between women within the subculture is a lesbian one from the start. Her use of

27 Most Western discussions about the positive relationship between women established through the consumption of romance/erotic fiction describe the sense of community thereof as one of feminist empowerment rather than lesbian eroticism. See, for example, Esther Sonnet’s analysis of Virgin Publishing’s Black Lace imprint in “‘Erotic Fiction by Women for Women’: The Pleasures of Post-Feminist Heterosexuality,” Sexualities 2:2 (1999), 167-87.
“lesbian” here is in part similar to Adrienne Rich’s idea of the lesbian continuum, where the BL community consists of women who not only create, consume, and share fantasies with each other but through these activities also support each other financially. But the “lesbian” in Mizoguchi’s work also refers to a textual intercourse where women engage in sexual exchanges with each other through the medium of male homoeroticism.

Mizoguchi first explains her use of “lesbian” through a Japanese term, *shikō*. Two sets of Chinese characters are both pronounced as *shikō* in Japanese and are both used in conjunction with sexuality: *嗜好* is close to “taste” and *指向* means “orientation.” Mizoguchi explains that while in BL communities the first *shikō* often refers to participants’ personal erotic “taste” in scenarios and character types, the extent to which this “taste” defines an abnormal sexual identity makes it closer to its counterpart—sexual orientation (226). Mizoguchi thereby defines BL participants, or the *fujoshi*, as more than just a hobbyist or someone with a perverted taste, but as a minority sexual identity in the modern sense (227).

Arguments about *fujoshi* as a sexual identity rather than a taste have been made before about *fujoshi* as a transgender identity, in the sense that they are “gay men trapped in a woman’s body.” The argument is first made by Sakakibara Shihomi, who is herself a writer of novels with BL themes. In *Yaoi genron: yaoi kara mieta mono* [Yaoi theory of fantasy: what yaoi reveals] (1998), Sakakibara made the bold claim that herself included, many yaoi (BL) fans are in fact psychologically MTF gay men, and yaoi
fantasy is the medium through which they project both their desire and their discomfort with their bodies. Uli Meyer also uses terms such as “girlfag” and “transfag” to understand the identity embodied by BL fandom (244). Just as Meyer’s phrase “creative transvestism” suggests, *fujoshi*’s sexual identity is a textual/virtual one, and this is also Mizoguchi’s central argument. But in contrast to the transgender argument, which positions BL participants’ desire in relation to the text, Mizoguchi locates desire between participants.

While the ostensible eroticism of BL as a genre lies in its sexualization of relationship between men, Mizoguchi posits that the eroticism fundamental to the existence of the subculture is lesbian eroticism between participants. Without the sexual fantasy provided, adapted, and disseminated by members of the community, participants’ desire cannot be fulfilled (231). Mizoguchi explains that participants as “virtual lesbians’ exchange texts, just as lovers in real life exchange kisses, caresses, and bodily fluids” (244). And since these textual/sexual fantasies are produced, consumed, and shared within a community of both friends and strangers, Mizoguchi characterizes the exchange as a “promiscuous” one (233). The community of heterosexual women who disidentify from their feminine self due to the oppression of patriarchy in Ueno’s

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thesis thus, in Mizoguchi’s argument, becomes a community of promiscuous lesbians, who indulge in virtual intercourse with each other via the alibi of male homoeroticism.

Mizoguchi’s interpretation of BL desire is fascinating in the sense that she moves relationality from within BL texts to without, while at the same time eroticizing that relationality. In her discussion of BL as a virtual lesbian community, Mizoguchi does not emphasize the significance of the textual fantasy being exchanged as male homosexual. Indeed, it could be argued that any community where women create erotic content for women is a virtual lesbian community. But as stated above, the unique lack of distinction between creator and consumer in BL subculture allows the relationship between participants to be more of an exchange than a unidirectional reception.

In terms of creating erotic content, a community of women who produce lesbian erotica with women audience in mind is more likely a matter-of-fact lesbian community—there is neither anything “virtual” about its lesbianism nor any need to theorize it as lesbian. The uniqueness of BL as a subcultural community is its multilevel mismatch between identity, desire, practice, and community, which makes an interpretation like Mizoguchi’s a theoretical move that challenges how these concepts are aligned in modern definitions of a sexuality.

While what BL does as a genre is mending the gap between male homosociality and homosexuality, what BL does as a subculture is establishing an erotic community of women that disentangles identitarian categories from their taken-for-granted linkages.
In the following section, I tie these two aspects of BL—the textual and the subcultural—together through Azuma Sonoko’s reworking of Sedgwickian theory in order to make sense of the (a)political consequences of BL and how to read a “bad” object like BL in its full complexities.

**III. Traffic in Male Bonding**

While male homoeroticism is relegated to the background in Mizoguchi’s discussion about virtual lesbianism, it’s worth bringing it back to the forefront again to consider the role it plays in this relationality between women. In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick famously proposes the idea of the erotic triangle, which she defines as the consolidation of male homosociality through two men’s “traffic in women,” a phrase Sedgwick borrows from Gayle Rubin (25). Sedgwick explains that the male-female-male triangle is prevalent in English literature where (apparently heterosexual) men are in competition for the same woman, while borrowing Claude Lévi-Strauss’ words, the woman is but a ‘‘conduit of a relationship’ where the true *partner* is a man” (26).

In Sedgwick’s theorization, this triangular formulation only applies to male, rather than female homosociality, first of all because male homosociality established through the triangle serves to consolidate patriarchal power, and female homosociality is not part of the heteronormative structure that Sedgwick discusses in the book. Secondly, the “relatively smooth and palpable continuum of female homosocial desire” also eliminates the need for an alibi (23). While Sedgwick describes the elision of
lesbianism as a necessary one, she also proposes that “much better analyses are needed of the relations between female-homosocial and male-homosocial structures” (18).

An attempt to fill in the absence of discussion about female homosociality that Sedgwick describes can be found in Terry Castle’s book *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1995). In the book, Castle proposes a “subverted triangulation,” where the man is the object of exchange between the bond of two women. But this “erotic counterplotting,” as Castle calls it, is not just a gender reversal of the Sedgwickian triangle. Castle explains, through her analyses of literary texts, that female homosociality is in fact a destabilizing force of the classic male-female-triangle: “Female bonding, at least hypothetically, destabilizes the ‘canonical’ triangular arrangement of male desire… and ultimately—in the radical form of lesbian bonding—displaces it entirely” (72). Castle’s reading of the female homosocial triangle is part of her larger objective to make visible the lesbian as a “ghosted being” through her unveiling of the female homoerotic in a triangle that involves a man. While Castle’s work is located within a similar context as Sedgwick’s—gay and lesbian studies in literature—scholars have attempted to approach and rework the idea of female homosociality in BL studies, in the same way as Henry Jenkins’ application of Sedgwick’s theory of male homosociality on slash fan studies.

In the context of BL, Japanese scholar Azuma Sonoko gives a new twist to filling the absence of female homosocial triangle in Sedgwick’s work. In her 2010 article “Mōsō
no kyōdōtai: yaoi comyuniti ni okeru renai kōdo no kinō” [Community of fantasy: the function of the code of love in yaoi communities], Azuma describes yaoi as a community established upon women’s exchange of male homoerotic fantasies (265). Even though female relationality in this community appears to be predicated upon their shared male object of desire, it can be read as the other way around. Azuma explains that because of women’s cultural familiarity with the narrative of romance, writing in the language of love is a more efficient way to communicate with other women (263-64). In this sense, BL fantasies as narratives of romance are a medium for women to connect, converse, and form a community. This is where Azuma adopts Sedgwick’s homosocial triangle to explain the relationship between women in the BL community: not only is the relationship between fujoshi a female homosocial bond facilitated by the exchange of men, but parallel to the misogyny in male homosocial bonding, Azuma also observes an aversion to male participation in BL communities (266).

Azuma explains that the material of BL fantasies—male homoeroticism—is the community’s creative way to exclude heterosexuality and the physical presence of maleness from the relationship between women. By keeping their shared object of desire a fantasy of male homosocial/homoerotic relationship rather than individual men in real life, women in BL communities strategically maintain their bond by excluding the intrusion of heterosexuality (268). Azuma explains that although the intention of such an
exclusion may not have been a feminist one, it has the potential to neutralize the heteronormative imperative for women (270).

The word that Azuma uses for this relationship between women is kizuna 绊 (bond)—the same word used in the title of the Japanese translation of Sedgwick’s *Between Men: Otokodōshi no kizuna* (The bond between men). The word kizuna has become a buzzword in Japan, according to Anne Allison, since the 3.11 disaster in 2011.29 Kizuna has come to signify a sense of national and communal togetherness in rallying hope for post-disaster reconstructions. Rebecca Suter describes the mainstream media use of the word kizuna as part of an official discourse on a Japanese “collective spirit” that disregards individual experiences of isolation.30

But kizuna in its original definition simply means bonding—a physical rope that ties animals to a pole, or the metaphorical ties between individuals. A popular BL manga series by Kodaka Kazuma is named exactly as Kizuna (1992-2008), which follows the romantic relationship between two male characters from middle school all the way to adulthood.31 In the forth volume of the series, the synopsis describes the two lovers as having “strong kizuna both in body and in spirit” [kokoro mo karadamo tsuyoi kizuna de

Kizuna in this BL manga refers to the romantic bonding between the lovers, who are tied to each other through every turn of fate. The word kizuna therefore connotes ties that are both social and individual, physical and metaphorical, erotic and propagandist. Kizuna is therefore a perfect word to use in the context of Sedgwick’s theorization of homosocial desire, which is deliberately capacious to include both the erotic and the social.

Although Azuma refers to kizuna between women as equivalent to that between men, and she doesn’t discuss the significance of the fictional male bonding within female bonding, her argument is similar to Castle’s in that female homosociality in the context of BL communities can be a destabilizing force. Female homosociality is a difficult topic to address in Sedgwick not only because of the “smooth and palpable continuum” of female homosocial desire but because female bonding is also ruptured by male homosocial desire and the patriarchal structure it facilitates. As Castle explains, patriarchal structure is predicated upon the fact that the male dominated erotic triangle prevents the woman in the triangle to form homosocial bondings with another woman. The potential of female homosociality, or of its more radical form, lesbian bonding, according to Castle, is that it performs the same function as its male counterpart. A

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traffic in men isolates the male term from other men, and by suppressing male bonding, the reverse erotic triangle could destabilize the patriarchal structure at large (72-73).

While Azuma’s thesis attributes a similar effect to female homosociality, the operation that she describes is slightly different. In Azuma’s version of the female kizuna, the third term in the triangle is not one man but two—two men who are in a seamless continuum between male homosociality and male homosexuality. BL, as Jenkins contends about slash, bridges the gap between male homosociality and homosexuality by turning the “straight men falling in love with each other” plot into a genre convention. While resistance and obstacles leading to homosexual consummation provide pleasure for the narrative, sexual union between men is a taken-for-granted destination and the ultimate object of desire for BL.

In a reverse erotic triangle, when the third term is male homosocial desire itself, and when the women’s desire is not for any man in particular but for the continuum between male homosociality and male homosexuality, this triangulation has an entirely different relation to patriarchal and heteronormative structures from either Sedgwick’s or Castle’s triangle. Instead of isolating the man and suffocating the potential for male homosocial bonding (as Castle suggests), female kizuna in BL communities not only establishes homosociality between women by excluding heterosexual desire but also restores the continuum between male homosociality and homosexuality.
In this scenario, the release from patriarchal oppression that women experience through BL fantasy is more than temporary. For Ueno and Kurihara, the purpose of BL is to offer a temporary shelter from the “pollution” of gender hierarchy, a sanctuary where women are free to disidentify from the female as the stigmatized sex—in other words, BL functions strictly in the domain of gender. With female homosocial bonding and its eroticization of male homosociality in sight, however, BL fantasy also operates on the sexual domain, where the gaping wound between male homosociality and homosexuality can be remedied, and female homosociality can also be reestablished through the process. With Sedgwick’s theorization in mind, a destabilization of the sexual structure can go back to shake up the gender structure, since patriarchy is predicated upon the divide between the homosocial and the homosexual in men. Once male bonding can slip into male bonking at any moment, and when the pleasure that women take in this slippery continuum strengthens their bond with other women, the patriarchal traffic in women could barely hold its shape.

It is useful now to bring back Mizoguchi’s understanding of female bonding in BL communities as a lesbian one. Although Azuma mentions that there isn’t as strong a sense of homophobia against lesbianism in BL communities, her conceptualization of female homosociality is clearly not a sexual one (266). But if her theorization of female homosociality is applied to Mizoguchi’s argument, the latter’s virtual lesbian community can in fact be read as the community built upon the reverse erotic triangle. It
is the eroticism that Mizoguchi highlights in women’s relationality and her blurring of the lines between BL as a “taste” and as a sexuality that bring BL subculture closer to a queer community: not only is it queer in the sense of a minority sexuality, but also in the sense that it troubles mainstream assumptions about both male and female homosociality. BL permeates the homosocial with the erotic by collapsing heteronormative male bonding into the gay pornographic, and by establishing a female homosocial community that traffics fictional male homoeroticism.

The kind of kizuna established through BL fantasies therefore resists clear distinctions between the social and the erotic, between the textual and the corporeal. Its relationalities between men and between women do not subscribe to a gay/straight binarism, nor is it a continuum with a beginning and an end. If it has to be understood in sexual terms, what BL provides is more of a fantasy sexuality where the object of desire is relationality itself. And the kind of relationality that BL seeks cannot be found in traditional family romances, nor does it cohere with the kind of nationalist kizuna that supposedly moves the society forward. Relationality in BL is instead hedonistic, clandestine, indifferent to reproductive futurity and political correctness, and insistent upon collapsing the social into the erotic.

BL’s own relationality with theory is an ambivalent one. While it is squarely located within the social and historical circumstances of its gestation, the escapist disposition of the genre and the subculture as a whole allows BL to vacate the political
dimension of its fantasies. BL is not resistant to self-theorization—it is in fact more than voluble about its own narrative techniques and psychological mechanism. But its theoretical concerns do not tend to reach beyond the boundaries of the community. If as Ueno suggests, BL fantasy is a device that brings participants up in the air, the genre’s increasing complexity and popularity have allowed participants to stay in the air and to construct a self-sufficient sanctuary powered by the renewable energy of pleasure. Mizoguchi calls BL an “activism based on pleasure” [kairaku wo bēsu ni shita akutivizumu]: an activism that is unaware of nor interested in challenging the status quo, but which has unintentionally launched a revolution by pursuing pleasure (255-65). It is in this precise constitution that BL blends paradoxical notions of being simultaneously escapist and activist, disidentifying and community-building, apolitical and radical.

But these combinations are indeed paradoxical only in the context of radical political discourses in Western academia today. Academic narratives on BL often rehearse the very romantic fantasies that they seek to dominate through theory: first denigrating the object as an outcast, then pampering it with radical interpretations and smoothing out its politically suspect kinks, before redeeming it to its proper ranks. It is my argument in this chapter that, BL discourses, when iterated by fans who are

33 This can be seen in the number of “BL theory” books published by authors and artists who work in the BL industry themselves. Examples include Sakakibara Shihomi’s Yaoi genron, Nakajima Azusa’s Bishōnen gaku nyūmon [Introduction to bishōnen studies] and Tanatosu no kodono tachi [Thanatos’ children], Nobi Nobita’s Otona ha wakattekurenai [Adults don’t understand], and Miura Shion’s Shumi ja nainda [It’s not a hobby].
simultaneously consumers, creators, and critics, resist the academic desire to clean them up as a respectable object. The apparent paradoxes that intrigue critics are never problematic to the participants—if anything, the contradictions are a source of pleasure.

Pleasure in BL fantasies lies in the mechanisms that critics have demonstrated: taking flight from “pollution,” self-obliterating masochism, desubjectivation, identifying across categories, mending the gap between male homosociality and homosexuality, and the erotic intimacy between women who fantasize with each other. But BL as a subculture also takes pleasure in the incoherence between these mechanisms. If BL’s “bad politics” persistently inspires critics to either denounce or defend the genre, it is also what persistently produces pleasure in being messy, inconsistent, and irredeemable.

In the following chapters, I examine literary texts that have not previously been read in the context of fantasy, much less in the context of BL—women’s fantasy of male homoeroticism. Placing the pleasure back in moving across identity categories, in restoring the continuum between homosociality and homosexuality, in disidentification and desubjectivation, and in the line of flight from the here and now, I examine the writings of and about Mary Renault and Marguerite Yourcenar through their relationality with otherness.
Chapter 2: From Greek Love to Boys’ Love: Mary Renault’s Romanticization of Pederasty

Since the publication of her first novel in 1939, Mary Renault had been an enigmatic name surrounded by speculations, contradictions, and mystery. Until her death in 1983, Renault had published a total of fourteen novels and a biography. Although Renault’s early heterosexual romance novels were bestsellers at the time, she is now best known for her portrayal of male homoeroticism in ancient Greece. Despite her contemporary fame, however, she is rarely mentioned today in either mainstream media or academic circles. Only in the form of a niche online fandom do Renault’s works continue to generate enthusiasm and contemporary relevance: male homoerotic fan art by women.

In mid-1950s, Renault made a decisive shift in her career: from the heterosexual “hospital romance” that made her name, she briefly turned to male homoerotic romance, before eventually settling on historical novels that heavily emphasize Greek love. This shift left her fans and critics confounded, and it became all the more intriguing when her personal life was later revealed to the world: her lifelong partner, with whom she immigrated from England to South Africa and spent more than half a century together, is a woman. The idea that a lesbian writer would devote the majority of her career writing about male homosexuality is uncomfortable for critics today, especially because Renault’s positive portrayal of male homosexuality appears to be predicated upon a
denigration of women. Ruth Hoberman, for example, asks “[w]hy would a lesbian novelist, in novel after novel, focus on male characters, with women playing only marginal, often stereotypical roles as either monsters or victims?” (87).

The discomfort caused by the misalignment between Renault’s identity and her text is similar to the uneasiness that BL creates in its critics. The idea that certain kinds of reading and writing are simultaneously the privilege and the obligation of certain identities is inherent in academic studies of at least the past four decades. From feminist standpoint theory to queer deconstruction, academic discourses continue to seek the proper object of study that either embodies radical political potentials or could be interpreted as such. If my previous chapter demonstrates how critics have been perplexed by BL and have attempted to rescue it from its unsavory desires, this chapter begins by examining a similar story of critics trying to reconcile Renault’s writing with who she is assumed to be.

The second part of this chapter brings in the latest online fandom devoted to Renault, which focuses on Renault’s representation of male homoeroticism. These fan artworks and discussions based on Renault’s novels are located squarely within the BL sensibilities that I discussed in the previous chapter. By examining the unexpected affinities between the mid-twentieth century lesbian author and her millennial online fandom, I contend that the apparent contradictions between Renault and her works is best understood through the BL logic—which is the logic of fantasy. Distantiation,
disidentifications, cross-identification, and a preoccupation with relationality are the BL mechanisms that I propose to work well in a re-reading of Renault and her texts.

In the last section of this chapter, I perform close readings on Renault’s key texts through a BL lens. Instead of reading Renault in the context of gay and lesbian studies or queer studies, which is what critics have done in the past, I read her texts first and foremost as fantasies. More specifically, I argue that what critics have found problematic about Renault—her idealization of male homosexuality, her misogyny, and her indifference to identity politics—make sense for BL aesthetics. Finally, I focus on an important character in Renault’s historical novels—Bagoas the Persian eunuch. I contend that instead of reading Bagoas as transgender, it is more accurate and more productive to approach him as the paradigmatic boy in Boys’ Love.

**I. Lesbian Pioneer in Gay Literature: Renault’s Contested Reception History**

Throughout her career, Renault’s works had been both bestsellers and underground gay classics. Unlike her contemporary Radclyffe Hall, whose *The Well of Loneliness* was once persecuted and is now appreciated as a lesbian novel, Renault maintained two separate and mutually-exclusive audience bases. In a 2013 *New Yorker* article, Daniel Mendelsohn recalls that Renault had “two discrete and enthusiastic audiences…. The first, and larger, consisted of admirers of her historical fiction. The
second consisted of gay men.”¹ As Mendelsohn’s own membership in both types of audience indicates, Renault’s two “discrete and enthusiastic audiences” are not so much discrete in terms of demographics as much as they are in terms of their respective approach to Renault’s works. Because of Renault’s choice to foreground male homosexuality in her novels about Ancient Greece, to appreciate Renault’s achievements in historical fiction invalidates the significance of her works to modern gay culture, and vice versa. In what follows, I demarcate Renault’s two distinct audiences during the author’s active years, before I turn to more recent academic interpretations of Renault in gay and lesbian studies and queer critique.

**Historical Novel and Underground Gay Classic**

Renault’s success in the historical genre is well-established: David Sweetman remarks in his biography of Renault that she is “one of the most popular historical novelists in the English language” (xi). In *The Hellenism of Mary Renault* (1972)—the first full-length book that examines Renault’s novels—Bernard F. Dick commends her approach to historical materials “from the standpoint of a scholar” (*The Hellenism of Mary Renault* xvi, xiv). Dick describes Renault as an “anomaly” in another article, calling Renault the rare historical novelist who can “accept antiquity on its own terms without modernizing or embossing it” (“The Herodotean Novelist” 14).

Bernard F. Dick is one of the earliest critics who commented on the relationship between homosexuality and the historical genre in Renault’s works. In *The Hellenism of Mary Renault*, Dick praises Renault’s authentic recreation of ancient Greece by including homosexuality into the picture (57). He also claims that Renault’s historical novels are the genre in its purest form: they are neither historical allegories nor “homosexual fiction,” which either apply history to contemporary situations or represent homosexuality from the authors’ standpoint as homosexuals (57, 119-20). Dick implies not only that Renault’s representation of Greek homosexuality is historically accurate, but also that to confuse the (occasionally erotic) heroic friendship between ancient Greek men with modern homosexuality is gross anachronism.

For critics like Dick, Renault’s success lies in her treatment of the past independent of contemporary concerns. It therefore comes as no surprise that Dick’s book discusses Renault’s representation of homosexuality only as a device to bolster her novels’ authenticity: “Nowhere is her ability to immerse herself in the Greek ethos more evident than in her treatment of homosexuality. She makes no attempt to justify the practice but presents it as a given” (*Hellenism* 57). It is in this sense that Renault’s two audiences are discrete: that applauding her historical accuracy excludes the possibility of

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2 The examples that Dick provides for historical allegories are novels by Iris Murdoch and Alain Robbe-Grillet, who he claims are more popular with the academia than writers who write about history per se, i.e. Renault (57). The books that Dick does recognize as “homosexual fictions” include John Rechy’s *City of Night* and *Numbers*, Hubert Selby Jr.’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, André Gide’s *The Immoralist*, Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, and Colette’s *Claudine Married* (199).
reading contemporary significance into her works, which is understood by Dick as a misreading of her historical novels.

Meanwhile, the group of readers that Dick disagrees with—the gay readers from the 1950s to the 1970s—heralded Renault’s books as what Mary Beard calls “a badge of homosexuality.” Mendelsohn describes how this “badge” status worked during the time: “[o]lder gay men recall that, in the fifties and sixties, to walk into a bar with a copy of this book [The Charioteer] was a way of signaling that you were gay.” Sweetman relates a similar sentiment that “nobody read Mary Renault in public because it was a “dead giveaway” (xi). Renault’s unusual candor about love between men and her portrayal of a distant world in which homosexuality was not only tolerated but glorified allowed her works to be featured by gay bookshops around San Francisco in the seventies and for her “millions of gay readers” to see her as an “apostle of the sexual revolution,” to the author’s own astonishment (Sweetman 273).

Although Renault’s works are no longer considered essential reading for gay literature today, her status as a literary pioneer in writing about male homosexuality during the 1950s through the 1970s is undeniable. Lisa L. Moore describes Renault’s

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4 Daniel Mendelsohn, “The American Boy.” *The New Yorker*, vol. 88, no. 42, Jan. 2013. Note, however, that Renault’s books as a badge—a membership card to a sexual minority—only applied to gay men, not lesbians. The difficult relationship between lesbian, or more generally female readers and Renault’s works persists to this day and is a further indication of the problematic position Renault occupies between gender/sexual identity and her textuality.
works as “among the most popular homosexual fictions of the century, that had enormous significance for gay and lesbian readers, and that achieved mainstream success for not one but a series of homosexual protagonists” (24). Mary Renault was, as Sweetman calls, an “apostle” for gay and lesbian literature. If Radclyffe Hall represents a hidden wound that never stopped bleeding for lesbian and gay studies of literature, Renault in Moore and Sweetman’s words was a welcome dose of positivity that was widely beloved in the gay community during the turbulent years before and after the Stonewall Riots.

Renault’s two distinct groups of readers imply two mutually-exclusive ways to interpret the prevalence of male homosexuality in her texts. Readers who read her works as historical fiction could explain homosexuality as an integral part of an authentic depiction of ancient Greece. If Renault’s depiction of male homosexuality is sympathetic, it is a testimony to her literary achievement to simulate the exotic practices of a distant past. Greek love in this reading bears no resemblance to modern gayness and is not to be read politically.

The gay fans of Renault, however—the ones who walked into a bar with a copy of her book to identify each other—would have proposed an opposite way of approaching this tension between historicity and homosexuality in her works. Instead of seeing male homosexuality as a byproduct of historical accuracy, a gay reader would have argued the other way around: the historical setting is an excuse to write about
homosexuality in a more tolerant time and place. For Renault’s gay fans in the 1950s to the 1970s, her works were political allegories of an increasingly vocal gay identity in the contemporary world.5

In subsequent years, in the climate of rising political activism and the emergence of gay and lesbian studies as a discipline, the gay reading of Renault’s works took ascendancy over the historical one. Arguments like Dick’s about the homosexual element being ancillary to the historical have been criticized as “rabidly homophobic” for denying the “gay element of her work” (Abraham 191; Kopelson 120). History, in the gay reading of Renault’s works, is a “structural refuge” that allows the author to write more freely about non-normative sexualities (Hoberman 30; Zilboorg 139).

This line of argument works well to explain Renault’s career shift from heterosexual romance to historical fiction about male homoeroticism in mid-1950s. In 1953, Renault published The Charioteer, which was a hospital romance about a love triangle between three men set in the post-WWII period. The Charioteer is often considered to be Renault’s interim novel, where she kept the romance genre but replaced the straight couples with gay men. This was also her last contemporary novel—

5 Looking for practices of homosexuality in ancient civilizations to strengthen contemporary political agendas had begun as early as the nineteenth century. In One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, Halperin points out that “scholarly and political interests in ‘Greek Love’ developed side-by-side, if not exactly hand-in-hand, throughout much of the nineteenth century.” Halperin also mentions that the first study of Greek love in English, A Problem in Greek Ethics (1883) by John Addington Symonds, was “explicitly designed to promote judicial reform.” Renault’s Greek lovers transported scholarly interests in Greek homosexuality to an accessible, mainstream genre, and the opportune timing of the publication of her historical novels made it inevitable that readers attached political agendas to her works.
after *The Charioteer*, Renault switched to the historical fiction genre, beginning with *The Last of the Wine* in 1956, and remained prolific in the genre until she published her final novel, *Funeral Games*, in 1981. Renault’s career shift came as a surprise for her contemporaries, and even more so for her American publisher at the time. *The Charioteer* was “the first openly homosexual novel by a serious writer to be published in Britain since the war,” and Renault’s American publisher turned the book down for its scandalous topic.

If history is a structural refuge to write about illicit subjects, in the same sense as early science fiction was a fertile ground for gender and sexual experiments, it makes perfect sense for a non-straight author to resort to a genre about a distant time and place to write freely about homosexuality. It makes sense considering the initial reaction to *The Charioteer*—if writing about contemporary gayness risks censorship and disrepute, it is only logical to move the topic not only to a more distant setting, but also to a more reputable genre than romance. Historical fiction as a genre not only eliminates the need for contemporary realism but is also more generally considered a genre with more

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6 Renault’s biographer, David Sweetman, explains that there were only “three major works of fiction dealing with homosexuality” between the end of WWII and Christopher Isherwood’s *Down There on a Visit* (1962), which for Sweetman “marked the opening of the present era of liberation and the end of most literary taboos about homosexual love” (145). The other two books were Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* (1948) and James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), both initially published in the United States.


8 Claude J. Summers, for example, speculates about the role that the reception to *The Charioteer* may have played in Renault’s career shift: “It may well have been to avoid the problems she experienced in *The Charioteer* that Renault subsequently turned to historical settings, which allowed her to write of homosexual relationships with greater freedom and naturalness” (171).
masculine authority than romance fiction. For a woman writing in the 1950s, the historical genre granted more freedom not only for her characters (ancient Greece is where “gays can be citizens”\(^1\)) but for the author herself as well.

The problem of this line of argument is that first of all, Renault herself explicitly rejects this interpretation of her creative intent, and second of all, despite Renault’s contemporary fame and the strong argument about how her literary choice reflected the historical struggles of the gay community, the gay community has almost entirely forgotten about her.

For Renault, she is first and foremost a historical novelist. In an article where she comments on her choice of the genre, titled “History in Fiction“ (1973), Renault expresses her resistance towards politicizing her works and reading historical fiction as an allegory for the present. “No one, after all, is compelled to write about the past; if what you are really talking about is Nazi Germany or Vietnam or Texas, why not say so instead of misleading your readers about Nero or Caesar or Troy?”\(^1\) Since the most common allegorical reading of her novels is about contemporary homosexuality (instead of Nazi Germany and the likes), it appears that what she really complains about here is the kind of gay reading that suggests her choice of genre is merely an excuse to write

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\(^10\) Ibid., p. 66.
about a censored topic. In addition to her defense of the genre in its own right, Renault also has expressed elsewhere her disapproval of contemporary gay politics, which I address in the next section. By Renault’s own account, it is problematic to extol her as a gay apostle who bears political causes in mind when she turned to ancient Greece as her main literary inspiration. Renault would in fact appreciate Bernard Dick’s evaluation of her pure literary excellence in achieving historical authenticity.

For the three decades since Renault’s death in 1983, her name has been largely absent in both popular media and academic conversations. In an age of ruthless cinematic recycling of classic novels, Renault’s name has surfaced only in speculations about Oliver Stone’s 2004 movie Alexander, where critics wonder if Stone borrowed depictions of Alexander’s homosexuality from Renault. Renault’s “millions of gay readers” did not survive either. Mary Beard laments that while Renault had been a “badge of homosexuality,” now only “serious-minded teenagers” read her to be initiated in classical studies. For Mendelsohn, too, the gay community’s affection for Renault is now a fond memory of “older gay men.”

In the following section, I demonstrate how Renault’s obscurity today is more than a result of changing literary trends. By examining critical discourses surrounding Renault in gay and lesbian studies, I contend that there are fundamental problems in reading Renault in an identitarian framework, which was the reason why Renault’s works experienced a “fallout” despite its initial popularity.

**Lesbian Novelist, Gay Novels**

In academia, Renault was initially placed within a twentieth-century history of gay and lesbian writing that moves along a line of progression and liberation. In the middle of the emergence of gay and lesbian studies in the United States, Claude J. Summer’s *Gay Fictions: From Wilde to Stonewall* (1990) included Renault as part of his “male homosexual literary tradition” (15). Between the two pivotal events in this history—the 1895 Oscar Wilde scandal and the 1969 Stonewall riots—Summers argues that authors from Wilde, Willa Cather, Renault, Gore Vidal, to E. M. Forster represent a “development of homosexual consciousness” that eventually led to the identity-affirming event of Stonewall (28). In Summers’ book, Renault’s *The Charioteer* stands for an accommodationist perspective that nevertheless consolidated gay identity and subverted 1950s sexual ideologies (156, 168). Throughout *Gay Fictions*, Renault is represented as an author who has written about male homosexuality without her own

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15 David Sweetman mentions in his biography that “[o]ne result of the Gay Liberation Movement in America was the spread of Gay Studies, with Gay Literature, including Mary’s work, as part of the curriculum” (274).
lesbianism or her attitude toward the identity politics at the heart of Summers’ argument ever coming to the forefront.

Julie Abraham’s 1996 book Are Girls Necessary? Lesbian Writings and Modern Histories examines Renault precisely from that missing angle—Renault as a “lesbian writer.” In this book, Renault is placed alongside other “lesbian writers” such as Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Virginia Woolf. In contrast to Summers’ elision of gender, Abraham discusses Renault as a lesbian writer who adopts the masculine narrative voice of the historical genre. For Abraham, Renault is part of the generation of lesbian writers who were shaped by the decades from the 1880s to the 1950s, whose texts challenged the “heterosexual plot” through either complete disintegration or tactical mimicry. Abraham’s choice to include Renault in a book about “lesbian writings” is a unique one. Lisa L. Moore’s 1998 review of Abraham’s book calls Abraham’s inclusion of Renault “striking” because the author was so “frequently overlooked” (257). Moore also suggests that Abraham’s book could “spark long-overdue interest in this enigmatic figure among lesbian literary critics” (257).

The “long-overdue interest” in Renault has never surfaced, however, and Renault remains on the periphery, if not almost entirely out of circulation in recent academic studies. Gay and lesbian literary histories appear to be uncertain about how to categorize Renault under the rubric of gay and lesbian literature: is she a “lesbian writer,” a writer who has written significantly about male homosexuality, or a
“closeted” lesbian writer who was forced to write about male homosexuality as a camouflage? None of these labels adequately contains the often self-contradictory complexity of Renault and her works.

The category of “lesbian writer” fails to describe the predominance of male homosexuality and the relative insignificance of lesbian or even female sexuality in Renault’s works. “Author of gay novels,” on the other hand, ignores the oblique connection that readers and critics have been attempting to discern between Renault’s works, her gender, and her sexuality. “Closeted lesbian writer” provides a convincing argument about Renault’s creative motivation, but stops short at explaining Renault’s persistence in “closeted writing” when censorship was presumably lifted (or, as Renault herself insisted, was never there to begin with). For gay and lesbian studies as an academic discipline, the identity politics of liberationist movements allows and sometimes limits its approach to implicating author’s own identity in the discussion of literary texts. As a result of the unresolved conflicts between her subject matter and her presumed identity, Renault’s place in gay and lesbian studies of literature is at best an awkward one.

As I mentioned earlier, another problem to seeing Renault as a spokesperson to the gay reclamation of history is how vocal Renault herself had been about her

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16 See Renault’s afterword to The Friendly Young Ladies (1944).
resistance to the idea of identity and community, especially one that is defined by sexual practices. Lisa L. Moore mentions Renault’s “resistance to identification with the homophile and liberation movements that lionized her” and her “chilly, self-conscious distance both from [her homophile] readership and, in later years, from the gay and women’s liberation movements” (“Lesbian Migrations” 24).

Renault herself had commented on gay liberation movements as “[c]ongregated homosexuals waving banners,” which “will not bring back the tolerant individualism of Macedon or Athens” (The Friendly Young Ladies 283). A few lines later, she adds: “People who do not consider themselves to be, primarily human beings among their fellow-humans, deserve to be discriminated against, and ought not to make a meal of it” (283).

These comments are part of her notorious afterword to her novel The Friendly Young Ladies, which was published in 1944, but the afterword was appended in a new 1983 edition. It is interesting that Renault felt necessary to defend herself against being aligned with gay liberation after a space of forty years, during which the rights movement reached its height.

In the same afterword, Renault criticizes the invention of the word “gay,” although she does not directly comment on whether or not “gay” applies to either her characters or herself. She condemns the political, euphemistic use of the “splendid Old French word,” which she believes to have clouded a human sexual practice that has existed throughout history with redundant political significance (283). She does believe
that homosexuality is present in both 4th century B.C. and 20th century England, which is precisely why she refuses to give the latter a new name, which carries new political agendas and promises of social transformation specific to its time. For Renault, an insistence on staying apolitical does not imply homophobia, no matter how much it has been interpreted as such.

Both the misalignment between Renault’s identity and her texts and her disapproval of “congregated homosexuals” became known to the public relatively late in her life. This information came at a time (in the 1980s) when gay and lesbian studies was becoming institutionalized in U.S. academia, when identity politics implied in the discipline demanded authenticity from a proper object of study. The uneasiness both in categorizing an author like Renault and in dealing with her “unfashionable choices and prejudices” (Beard 13) eventually rendered Renault a “bad object”—a figure that fails to fit into a proper political agenda, but who also fails to be the enemy. The result is silence around the author and her works, because there is no critical language that explains the paradoxes that she embodies.

**Queer Redemption?**

The arrival of queer theory in U.S. academia in the 1990s as a critical approach to dismantle identity as an insidious construction marked a paradigm shift in the reading of sexuality in writing. Geared toward Michel Foucault’s historical analysis and Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, queer critique detaches itself from the quest of a
transhistorical gay identity that are latent until exposed by interpretive reading. If the mission of gay and lesbian studies is to reinterpret and recruit “lost gay classics,” queer critique seeks to interpret the very act of interpretation. Instead of reading for clues to gayness underlying the text, queer criticism reads for how the very concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality are constructed. Annamarie Jagose sums up succinctly that queer theory contains “those posthumanist and anti-identitarian critical approaches that are energized by thinking against the practices, temporalities, and modes of being through which sexuality has been normatively thought.”

With the arrival of queer criticism, it appears possible to tackle a writer like Renault without the pitfalls of identity politics and its categorizations. However, reading Renault in the queer context is a precarious endeavor. In her biography on Renault, Caroline Zilboorg approaches the subject based on a combination of close reading of Renault’s works and biographical evidences. Zilboorg argues that “Renault’s subjects and themes have more in common with queer understandings of sexuality than with the progressive homophile movements… or even with the ‘gay liberationist’ movements of the 1970s and 1980s” (xi). In Zilboorg’s characterization, Renault was ahead of her times.

The fact that Renault never identified with being homosexual or lesbian and even criticized the very idea of a gay identity allows Zilboorg to interpret Renault as queer,

even though Renault’s views about gender and sexuality “derive from a predominantly constructionist position, which is at once conservative… and radical” (xi). Zilboorg does provide rare insights into the possibility of understanding Renault’s life and works as beyond gay/lesbian identity politics. But the question remains as to how Renault’s beyondness can be qualified—after all, both queerness and heteronormativity can be beyond gay and lesbian categorizations set in antagonistic directions. In Renault’s case, the distinction between the two possibilities seems curiously slippery, since she appears to occupy both and neither position(s) at the same time.

Another critic who has read Renault in the queer context is Lisa L. Moore. In her *GLQ* article “Lesbian Migrations: Mary Renault’s South Africa” (2003), Moore mentions Renault’s queerness in the context of the author’s “queer aesthetic of distantiation” (25). By distantiation, Moore refers not only to Renault’s literary strategy to distance herself from her texts in terms of time, gender, and culture, but also to her geographical desire for distance that motivated her to relocate from her native Britain to South Africa in the 1940s. The effect of both distantiations, Moore notes, was “a lesbian literary pioneer who disavowed gay rights, considered women lesser artists than men, and benefited from the racial exploitation and segregation codified in apartheid” (23).

Like Zilboorg, Moore chooses to depict Renault as a complex author who has often been criticized for her lack of allegiance both to the gay community that “lionized” her and to the local South African community from which she, perhaps equally
unwittingly, obtained freedom from oppressive gender and sexual mores in postwar Britain. According to Moore, while Renault’s resistance to being a “homosexual writer” was “legendary,” she was “equally resistant to identifying as a woman writer” (29). The distantiation that Moore refers to is therefore a resistance to identity, a refusal to be aligned with the here and now of the author’s own gender, sexual, and national identities.

If queerness is understood as challenging normative definitions of identity categories, Renault can indeed be called “queer.” But queerness is also post-identity—a deconstruction of a system of thought that has built communities and accrued activist momentum in a way that became normative in its own right. Renault’s resistance to homophile movements and identity politics would be pre-identity—she refuses the political premise of rights movements and the rationale behind identity in the first place. Similar to my discussion of Otomo’s deconstruction of the self in reading BL, whether or not this deconstruction of an identity before it exists is indeed “queer” is problematic.

Zilboorg and Moore are two rare examples that bring Renault into the context of queerness, yet neither of them go beyond utilizing the term queer to identify Renault’s personal tendency to resist political alliances and self-proclamations. As a word that carries implications of political radicality and theoretical sophistication in academia since the 1990s, queer has the potential to redeem Renault from the “bad” side of politics and literary value. But it seems more difficult to consider Renault’s actual works in
terms of queerness than it is to defend her personal politics with the same term.

Although Renault’s novels since *The Charioteer* almost exclusively focus on homosexual characters and relationships, and the word “queer” is in fact scattered all over *The Charioteer* referring to gay men in the postwar era, her books have never been considered “queer” in the post-gay, academic sense.

Queerness is understood as a mode of critique rather than about a specific sexuality, which is where queer theory divulges from lesbian and gay studies: whereas lesbian and gay studies tackles homosexuality as an object of study, queer theory defines itself as a philosophical and political strategy of critique rather than a study of particular objects. With representation no longer the measurement of political efficacy in textual analysis, writing about “queers” and being politically queer are two different, although not incompatible ideas.

The silence around Renault in academia today is a result of the awkward combination of who the author is, what she writes about, and how she proclaims an apolitical orientation. Queer criticism is used to heteronormative subjects being silent about politics and the mainstream’s lack of action is easily understood as complacency and sometimes homophobia. But queer criticism is not geared towards handling a non-normative subject with a voice that does not articulate political aspirations. A prolific writer who has been widely considered to be an inspiration for a whole generation of gay men, who is said to have escaped censorship and persecution through literary
camouflages, but who claims that she has never been subjected to oppression in the first place remains an enigma to radical politics.

As I have demonstrated, when Renault is studied alongside her own works, the mismatch between her (lack of an) identity and her works and her “unfashionable” politics made her a bad, or at least an uncomfortable object for both gay and lesbian studies and queer critique. In what follows, I propose that reading Renault from a different perspective—the BL perspective—not only dissolves her hopeless contradictions but is also more productive in understanding how her works can still be (if not more) relevant today.

II. Reading Renault Through Boys’ Love Fantasy

While Renault’s works have mostly lost their relevance for readers of historical fiction and gay literature, Renault has found a new fandom in internet communities. On LiveJournal.com, the social networking website that has been a platform for many fandom communities since 1999, there are two major communities devoted to Renault and her works: maryrenaultfics (since 2004) and maryrenault (2005).18 While these communities have become less active due to decreasing popularity of LiveJournal itself, Renault fandom is still active on more recent fandom platforms such as Tumblr and Archive of Our Own, which is the biggest English-language community for submitting

fan fictions, with a high percentage in the slash genre. On the Archive of Our Own website, a keyword search for “Mary Renault” yields more than 700 results, with the latest one updated in March, 2018. A majority of these fan fiction entries are tagged with a “/” mark between character names, indicating that these are stories that elaborate on the erotic relationship between these characters.

Renault’s new fandom, a surprising phenomenon to take place three decades after her death, is preoccupied with the relationalities between her male characters. In what follows, I examine how this fandom reveals the fantastical disposition of Renault’s works, and how reading Renault through fantasy yields new understanding of Renault as a cross-writing, rather than lesbian or gay author.

**Renault’s Millennial Fans**

In the Internet universe of user-created content and forums, Renault’s novels are the subject of fan communities in the company of the *Harry Potter* series, the *Lord of the Rings* series, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Renault’s new fans are not the “older gay men” who have gone digital, nor are they the “serious-minded teenagers” interested in classical times, or the academics who are finally paying the author her long-overdue attention. The cult popularity that Renault’s works achieved in the community of online fan “prosumers,” especially for those who are interested in “slash” — fantasy about male

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19 For the Archive of Our Own website, see [https://archiveofourown.org/](https://archiveofourown.org/).
20 Search performed on March 13th, 2018.
homoeroticism largely produced for and by women—demands a renewed examination of how Renault’s works could be reread and re-evaluated.\(^\text{21}\)

According to Fanlore Wiki, one of the largest Wikipedia websites about English-speaking fan activities, one of Renault’s LiveJournal community has been in existence since 2004, aptly named “Mary’s Handmaidens.”\(^\text{22}\) On the Fanlore page about “Mary’s Handmaidens,” a passage describes the gender and sexual constituent of the online community: “The community includes members of both sexes, with (by comparison with many other fandoms) a notable contingent of men, though the majority of writers of fan fiction are women. Various sexual orientations are represented among the membership.”\(^\text{23}\) The statement about a “notable contingent of men” is a curious one compared to the “handmaidens” in the title of the community. Despite its consciously inclusive taglines (“the community includes members of both sexes”, “various sexual orientations are represented”), the community adopts a female persona as its identity.

The use of “handmaidens” here is far from an innocent oversight of the political significance of gender. While making careful differentiations between genders and

\(^{21}\) “Slash” as a subcultural phenomenon originated in the 1970s Star Trek fandom, in which a group of female audience fantasized about romantic relationships between the two main characters—Kirk and Spock—with a “/” sign between character names to indicate active/passive characterization. Over the past forty years, slash has matured into a prolific subculture that transforms mainstream cultural products into homoerotic fantasies. While slash is the common moniker in North America and the larger English-speaking world, it is highly similar to BL in East-Asia, and the two subcultures have intermingled in recent years, especially on the digital platform.

\(^{22}\) See [http://fanlore.org/wiki/Mary_Renault](http://fanlore.org/wiki/Mary_Renault).

\(^{23}\) See [http://fanlore.org/wiki/Maryrenaultfics](http://fanlore.org/wiki/Maryrenaultfics).
sexual orientations of their actual members, the creative and desiring position of the diversified group is interpreted as that of a woman—a handmaiden. The subject positions that participants in this community adopts is not simply that of a fan, but that of a slash fan, or in the Japanese equivalent, a *fujoshi*. It is important that the gender or sexual orientation of the actual fans does not interfere with the gender position of their fandom. Slash, as BL, is predicated on the fan’s disidentification from the male homoeroticism portrayed in the text, and “Mary’s Handmaidens” is an apt illustration of both this fantasy mechanism and of how this mechanism works well with reading Renault’s works.

Another example of Renault’s Internet fandom is The Theban Band’s fan arts based on Renault’s novels (see fig. 4). Among the website’s artworks based on media texts as diverse as *Doctor Who, Brokeback Mountain*, and *Harry Potter*, a section dedicated to “Originals” (meaning that they are based on literature rather than film/TV shows) contains works based on Renault’s *The Charioteer, The Last of the Wine*, and *The Persian Boy*. As are other sections on the website, the focus of the artworks is on the homoeroticism that is either already present in the text (*Brokeback Mountain*) or interpreted/inserted by the artist (between Jack Sparrow and Will Turner in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, for example). By depicting two men with familiar celebrity faces and/or in

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24 The Theban Band is a fan art website dedicated to slash arts based on both movies and literary texts. The website can be found here: https://www.squidge.org/praxisters/
recognizable fictional settings embracing, kissing, and gazing amorousely into each
other’s eyes, the artist evokes a romanticized fantasy world in which male
homoeroticism is the sole object of desire.

Figure 4: Front page of The Theban Band’s website

Among fan artworks on Renault’s works by The Theban Band, one piece based
on *The Charioteer* illustrates serial lines of flights from the fans to Renault, from Renault
to her characters, and then from her characters to antiquity (see fig. 5). The artwork
demonstrates the fantastical disposition of the simultaneous disidentification and cross-
identification with otherness, which in the scene depicted is embodied in a leap to
another time and place.
Figure 5: Fan art of *The Charioteer* by The Theban Band

This artwork captures the moment in which Ralph and Laurie’s flirtatious book-exchange takes place in *The Charioteer*. The novel follows the life of Laurie Odell from his public school education in the 1930s to his hospitalization after being wounded as a

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25 The picture is untitled on the website, but the page itself is named “comprehension,” which may be what the artist intends for the title of the art (https://www.squidge.org/praxisters/original/comprehension.html).
soldier during WWII. The “charioteer” in the title refers to the book’s use of Plato’s allegory in *Phaedrus*: the charioteer strives to steer two horses that represent two aspects of the human soul—reason and morality for one, and passion and desire for the other. The novel structures Laurie’s struggles with his own homosexual desire according to the Platonic allegory, represented by two love interests in the novel. Andrew, the conscientious objector who works as a nurse at Laurie’s military hospital, represents the innocent, rational partner who is not aware of the political and physical realities of homosexuality. Ralph, on the other hand, is the one who awakened teenage Laurie’s homosexual desires and who later returns as the worldly queer man who is fully aware of the allure and pitfalls of desire. The novel is known for its “happy ending” in which Laurie achieves spiritual balance between passion and reason through his acceptance of both Ralph’s affection and his own homosexuality.

In this sense, *The Charioteer* could be read as a *bildungsroman* that portrays the coming-of-age and coming-to-terms of a gay man with his sexuality. It is therefore curious as to how much the forward-moving progress of this modern *bildungsroman* looks backwards, all the way back to Greek philosophy, to establish its identity and the scene of desire. At the beginning of the novel, Laurie as a public school pupil is

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26 *Phaedrus* is, of course, itself a text intimately tied into modern Euro-American gay culture. Widely considered a precursor of gay literature, for example, *Death in Venice* makes references to *Phaedrus* in Aschenbach’s comparison between his own desire and the “discourses on the love of a man for a boy” described in the Greek classic.
summoned to the bedroom of Ralph Lanyon’s, an elder student whose erotic escapades with another boy was discovered and who is about to be expelled. Ralph presents Plato’s *Phaedrus* to Laurie as a farewell gift, which carries both didactic and sexual implications due to the book’s discussions of homoerotic love. More importantly, however, *Phaedrus* functions as a mise-en-scène of fantasy. Ralph encourages Laurie to read the book but cautions that what is describes “doesn’t exist anywhere in real life, so don’t let it give you illusions. It’s just a nice idea” (*Charioteer* 32).

If Ralph is attempting to initiate Laurie to homosexuality, it is interesting that the knowledge of homosexuality that he passes on (instead of homosexuality itself) is explained as a fantasy. In this scene of erotic initiation of a young boy, the only physical contact between the two characters is through a book that is “just a nice idea.” In the same scene, the two are depicted as dangerously close to a kiss:

> Lanyon seemed about to step forward; and Laurie waited. He didn’t think what he was waiting for. He was lifted into a kind of exalted dream, part loyalty, part hero-worship, all romance. Half-remembered images moved in it, the tents of Troy, the columns of Athens, David waiting in an olive grove for the sound of Jonathan’s bow.

> Still watching him, Lanyon made a little outward movement. He paused, and drew back. (*Charioteer* 31)

In the passage, Ralph merely makes an “outward movement” and then steps back. What takes place in between, the “[h]alf-remembered images” of “the tents of Troy, the columns of Athens, David waiting in an olive grove for the sound of Jonathan’s bow” preoccupy Laurie’s mind strangely more so than the immediate presence of Ralph.
These images knit together a tapestry of classical allusions that—in the context of Renault’s universe—signify a premodern lack of distinction between male homosociality and homosexuality. Instead of staying in the here and now of sexual initiation and physical desire, Laurie is transported to a fantasy of a distant past that is imagined to be free from modern notions of normal and perverse sexuality.

Together with the *Phaedrus* that Laurie physically receives, the fantasy of a homoerotic past mediates the modern, homosexual relationship between Laurie and Ralph throughout the entire story.27 In this sense, *Phaedrus* functions for the two characters much like how Renault’s books function for her readers. *The Charioteer* is an adoring look to the past clothed as a story about the inner struggles of a modern homosexual, or, more precisely, about how the struggles must be negotiated through a fantasy of the past. Renault’s books were for her mid-century gay readers “a badge of homosexuality” in much the same way Plato’s *Phaedrus* is for Ralph and Laurie: a communication about desire in the present through a collective fantasy of a past that contains the ideal form of that desire.

Just as the twentieth-century fantasy about Greek love as represented by Plato and his contemporaries stands between Laurie and his object of desire in Renault’s text, in The Theban Band’s fan art, the copy of *Phaedrus* is tucked between the two bodies in

27 The copy of *Phaedrus* bequeathed by Ralph is one of Laurie’s few belongings that survives the war. Laurie keeps it with him at the military hospital, where he hides the book from Andrew as if it would expose his homosexuality. In the end, however, Laurie gives the book to Andrew, also as a gesture of initiation.
school uniforms, anticipating but also preventing the imminent kiss. Laurie looks back into a mythical past in order to contextualize his homosexuality, and Renault herself turns to the idea of Greek Love to write about male homoeroticism. In a similar way, the 21st-century fans locate in Renault’s works a kind of male homoeroticism that seems unavailable in the here and now of post-gay sexual politics.

The three-fold leap in time for Renault’s millennial fans constitutes a fantasy that is thrice removed from the “reality” of sexual desire. If Ralph and Laurie could be said to negotiate their own identity through an ancient Greek philosopher, and if as critics have argued, Renault masks her own lesbian identity by male homoeroticism located both temporally and cultural distant from her own, it is much more difficult to argue that there is a sexual truth being filtered through Plato, Renault’s characters, and finally Renault herself for the millennial fans.

Slash/BL fantasies are most prominently defined by their distinction from gayness. This deconstructionist absence of an ultimate truth is more poignant when the “destination”—Greek love—is put into consideration: as Mendelsohn suggests, origins of the Greek love ideals are no more than a fantasy of “Victorian inverts.” In this sense, rather than approximating a stable identity and a sexual truth, the serial displacements

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28 This distinction is only about the fantasy, not about the participants—Green et al. has pointed out that many participants of slash fan cultures are in fact queer women.
of time, place, and gender instead constitutes a mode of desire that is driven by a look to
an elsewhere that does not exist, a fantasy that feeds on its own tail.

Another example of fan artwork by The Theban Band is based on *The Last of the Wine*, featuring Lysis and Alexias, the lovers in Renault’s original text (see fig. 6). As in
the artwork for *The Charioteer*, this picture focuses on the dynamic between two slender
youths, who express desire through their lines of sight and subtle placement of hands.
Although critics have pointed out the aesthetic difference between slash/Boys’ Love and
gay art, and it is visible in this particular artwork that the male body and the posture in
which they are represented lean more towards the slash/Boys’ Love taste for romantic
understatement than to dominant aesthetics in gay art, what is more important is the
context of the art. As mentioned before, the Theban Band website is dedicated to
“pairings” of male characters taken mostly from mainstream media texts. The majority
of the website’s pairings consist of characters who do not apparently share romantic
relationships on-screen and require the artist’s fantasies to fill in the blanks.\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig6.png}
\caption{Fan art of \textit{The Last of the Wine} by The Theban Band\textsuperscript{31}}
\end{figure}

\textit{The Last of the Wine}, due to its romantic depiction, has yielded many artworks in a similar context. Another example (see fig. 7) is posted on a blog dedicated to homoerotic pairings based on \textit{Attack on Titan} (Japanese: \textit{Shingeki no kyojin}) and \textit{Haikyuu!!}, two Japanese manga and anime series that have been active since 2009 and 2012,

\textsuperscript{30} Examples on the website include Fox Mulder and Alex Krycek from \textit{The X-Files}; Frodo/Sam and Aragorn/Boromir from \textit{The Lord of the Rings}; Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy from the \textit{Harry Potter} series.

\textsuperscript{31} https://www.squidge.org/praxisters/original/agora.html
respectively. Although this places the blog closer to the Japanese fan culture surrounding BL and *yaoi*, the blog administrator still uses terms such as “ship” to describe the fantasy of romance between two characters, which makes the blog a good illustration of the cross-fertilization between BL and slash fandoms. In contrast to the previous artwork, this piece strips away the Greek setting, leaving two young male bodies at the center of the work, again engaging in suggestive gestures and looks. Both artworks incorporate Renault’s novel but strip away its references to Greek life, politics, and the historical specificity of Greek pederasty, extracting only the young male couple that embodies the ideal of romance and erotic tension in slash/BL aesthetics.
These fan artworks suggest a new way to read Renault’s male homoerotic historical novels. For slash/BL fans, history is but an excuse to indulge in a homoerotic narrative that is disengaged from modern gay politics due to its distance from the contemporary world. The double distance that Renault’s novels provide through a mid-

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twentieth century author writing about ancient Greece helps explain Renault’s peculiar popularity for these fans, who participate in fandoms of Hollywood fantasy movies and Japanese manga/anime, but who also discovered “lost slash/BL classics” in Renault’s works.

History, both of ancient Greece and Renault’s mid-twentieth century, serve as fantasy material for 21st-century fans. History promises a world in which beautiful boys are free to fall in love with each other without social persecution and without the need to “congregate” and to wave banners in the streets. In this sense, Renault’s relationship to politics is surprisingly closer to her 21st-century fans than to her gay readers in the 1950s to the 1970s. Like slash and BL, Renault’s historical fiction is a fantasy that looks to and appropriates an elsewhere for an erotic ideal that is absent from a century that went through the medicalization and criminalization of homosexuality, the rights movements, and the political struggles that are still happening today.

The unexpected affinity between Renault and her millennial fans provides clues to how an author such as Renault can be read in an academic context. Slash/BL provides a mode of desire so deeply intertwined with appropriation and distantiation that it bypasses the problem of identity in gay and lesbian studies and queer theory altogether. The cross-gender desire for homoeroticism shared by slash/BL and Renault is homophile without concerns for gay rights, denies identity without political radicalism, and indulges in the scene of desire without involving the self.
Rather than either condemning or redeeming Renault through the existing terms in gay/lesbian studies and queer theory, I read her “bad politics” as part and parcel of the particular mode of desire that she represents, and for which she is now appreciated by a new generation of fans. In what follows, I read Renault’s texts through BL aesthetics and mechanisms, which I examined in my first chapter.

**Romance and Relationality**

As the artworks based on Renault’s works demonstrate, the central concern for her millennial fans is the relationality between male characters. If bridging the gap between male homosociality and homosexuality within the text is BL’s raison d’être, these artworks are squarely located in the subculture of deriving pleasure from the romantic reconciliation of the social and the sexual. While Renault’s turn to the historical fiction genre represents for critics (and perhaps to the author herself) to be her departure from romance fiction by embracing a more masculine genre, I contend that her historical novels are still very much romantic, i.e., concerned with the relationality between characters. In this sense, Renault’s millennial fans read her works exactly as they are: romantic fantasies about male homoeroticism.

*The Last of the Wine* (1956), the novel that two of the artworks I referenced are based on, is an example of Renault’s preoccupation with relationality. In the book, Socrates’s lessons, the war between Athens and Sparta, and pederastic conventions all work together to construct a convincing portray of ancient Greek society. Nevertheless,
the centerpiece of the novel is the romance between Alexias and Lysis. At the beginning of their relationship, Alexias is around fifteen years old, and Lysis is in his early twenties. Although their age discrepancy fits into the pederastic convention, Renault’s depictions make sure that their relationship is distinct from the institutionalized bonding between an adult man an adolescent boy.

Renault portrays Alexias as a beautiful boy, and adult male suitors “thrust themselves forward and others back” whenever Alexias enters the palaestra. Lysis is interestingly never one of these disdained suitors, nor is he ever considered a candidate throughout the book. Lysis is himself a youth fresh out of boyhood, who, to Alexias’ surprise, has never accepted a suitor as he “had always been impatient for manhood.”

In other words, although The Last of the Wine is not a modern love story thinly veiled by fantasies of chiton-clad, olive-wreath-bearing men, the main characters are nevertheless made out to be an exception to Greek traditions.

The romance aesthetics can also be found in Renault’s language. Before Alexias and Lysis become lovers, when Alexias learns that Lysis has come to observe his running exercise, the following passage describes Alexias’ excitement from his point of view:

It was as if a great wind blew at my back and my heels grew wings. I scarcely knew that I touched the ground, and I finished so far ahead of the rest that everyone cheered me. I heard Lysis’ voice; and being breathless already, from running and from suddenly seeing him, now I felt as if my heart would burst my

33 Ibid.
breast, and saw black in the sky. But it passed and I was able to speak when he greeted me.34

Renault’s language in this paragraph is almost as beautiful as it is clichéd: this is a scene of adolescent love that can be taken out and inserted into any young adult romance. Alexias’ feelings for Lysis is that of first love in its fluttering, chest-bursting glory, hiding underneath a placid surface, wishing to be reciprocated. Renault depicts the relationship between Alexias and Lysis as a romantic narrative between equals, an exception to Greek pederasty. This idealization of love between equals is in itself a fantasy, since even if their relationship is understood as one of heroic friendship, the relationship is still “dyadic and hierarchical” in ancient Greece.35 It is this romantic fantasy about pure love in an exotic setting that appeals to both Renault’s contemporary gay readers and her millennial fans. While gay readers today no longer find identitarian empowerment in Renault’s cross-writings, slash/BL fans continue to read her works as fantasies that do not correspond to identity categories and their political consequences.

Another famous male-male couple in Renault’s textual universe is from the Alexander Trilogy (1969-1981). The love affair between Alexander and Hephaestion is at the center of the trilogy, and while their relationship is a well-documented one in historical accounts, Renault dramatizes the intimate progress of their romance from

34 Ibid.
35 Kopelson, via David Halperin’s work on pederasty and the hero/pal paradigm, calls Renault’s characterization of Lysis and Alexias’ relationship as confusing heroic comradeship as nonhierarchical friendship (118).
childhood friendship, physical desire, to lifelong devotion. The inception of their romance is portrayed in similar ways as the one between Alexias and Lysis in *The Last of the Wine*. A delicate dance of temptation, hesitation, and longing takes place when a young Hephaistion struggles with his desire for Alexander:

Hephaistion, who was not very neat-handed, unwound with anxious care the walnut twig from its shining tangle, which smelled of some expensive wash used on it by Olympias, and of summer grass. This done, he slid his arm down to Alexander’s waist. He had done it the first time almost by accident; though not rebuffed, he had waited two days before daring to try again…. [Alexander] looked deeply into Hephaistion’s eyes, as always before a confidence. As always, Hephaistion felt as if his midriff were melting. (*Fire from Heaven* 142)

The amorous sensations such as the ones described in this scene (shining tangles smelling of summer grass, the melting midriff) are Renault at her best, providing readers with a somatic insight into historical figures while also romanticizing ancient practices of male homosexuality in a modern aesthetics of romance.

**Tactics of Distantiation**

Renault’s idealization of male homosexuality in her historical novels is shared by her contemporary characters, when Ralph gives Plato’s *Phaedrus* to Laurie and explains that its Greek philosophy about male love is “a nice idea” (32). Just as her character looks back in time in search of a romantic ideal that transports him away from postwar Britain, Renault herself departs from contemporary fiction and finds refuge in the distance in time, culture, and gender. And as I demonstrated in the section on Renault’s fan artworks, this amorous look back in time is also adopted by Renault’s millennial
fans, who look to Renault’s mid-twentieth century as a distant continent the same way Renault and her characters look to ancient Greece.

Ancient Greece as depicted by Renault also has its own objects of fantasies. Alexander and Hephaistion, the lovers in the Alexander Trilogy, also turn to a mythic past and away from their present. Throughout the novels, Alexander is obsessed with Aeschylus’ *Myrmidons*, specifically with the love between Achilles and Patroclus. Renault describes Alexander and Hephaistion seeing the *Myrmidons* on stage together for the first time: “Alexander was sitting trance-bound, tears streaming from his wide-open eyes… Hephaistion was holding his hand” (*Fire from Heaven* 164). Hephaistion later goes through “the complex business of ordering from Athens a copy of *The Myrmidons*, which he gave to Alexander” (197). The book exchange, reminiscent of Ralph giving Laurie a copy of *Phaedrus* in *The Charioteer*, acts not only as a physical token of affection, but also is a literal exchange of another male homoerotic relationship.

The fact that yet another idealized past serves as an amorous referent throughout Alexander and Hephaistion’s romance adds one more leap in time in Renault’s manifold distantiations. From Achilles/Patroklos, Alexander/Hephaistion, Ralph/Laurie, to Renault as author, and then to her 21st-century fans, desire and identification in and for Renault’s writings are always directed towards an elsewhere that can never be reached nor determined. Within the serial longing for alterity, what is missing is always a concern with the here and now, with what one is and represents—
the front and center of identity politics. Renault’s contempt for contemporary politics and fantasy’s departure from the familiar converge to create a narrative that strips the last residue of politics from both gender and sexuality and turns them into mythical ideals, forever on the horizon and never to be attained.

The recurrent motif of book sharing as an erotic gesture in Renault’s works also brings back my discussion about trafficking relationality in the previous chapter. Ralph and Laurie’s exchange of *Phaedrus* and Alexander and Hephaestion’s exchange of *Myrmidons* are both exchanges of a *fantasy of relationality*, not a single object of desire. Both moments turn the couples’ relationship from the homosocial to the homosexual in Renault’s works. Renault and her millennial fans, her “handmaidens,” occupy the two sides of the triangle that encompasses the fictional ones. Their extra-textual relationality is established upon the narrating and recreating of male homoerotic stories and evokes an eroticism that is unique to BL fandom.

**Misogyny as an Escape Strategy**

One aspect of Renault’s works that critics have found irreconcilable with a more progressive, political reading is the misogynistic tendencies in her texts. As I discussed in the previous chapter, misogyny is also a central dilemma for BL critique. Textual misogyny in both cases prevent a clean, coherent verdict on a genre or an author’s side on the political spectrum. In BL critique, Ueno theorizes *bishōnen manga*’s misogynistic bent as the genre’s mechanism of disidentification, and queer readings such as Otomo’s
turns the disidentification into an abstract dissolution of the self, rendering gender irrelevant. My reading of BL tends toward the former, which is seeing misogyny as part and parcel of the escapist strategy of the genre, without providing excuses for its problematic character. In my following reading of Renault, whose treatment of female characters (when there are any) is similar to BL’s denigration of women, I propose to interpret her misogyny through the mechanisms of BL fantasy.

Numerous critics have commented on the astonishing level of misogyny in Renault’s works in general (Beard; Hoberman; Moore 2003), and her misogyny is all the more surprising now that she is known to be a lesbian. Agnes Bushell’s response to Daniel Mendelsohn’s New Yorker article about Renault is the most straightforward of this type of critique: she explains that she has often felt “great resentment” toward Renault since unlike Renault’s gay readers, women who read Renault are not always influenced in a positive way.\(^{36}\) She says that Renault, “like her contemporary the lesbian novelist Marguerite Yourcenar, who also created idealized homosexual male characters, was a misogynist.”\(^{37}\)

Bushell argues that Renault’s portrayals of “heroic gay men” are unfortunately at the expense of female characters who are either marginalized or “loathsome,” and whom the author seems to “despise.”\(^{38}\) Bushell’s emotional reaction to Renault’s female

\[^{37}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{38}\text{Ibid.}\]
characters can appear to dwell on direct correlations between characterization, authorial intention, and reader’s response. But just as Hoberman’s question, “Why would a lesbian novelist, in novel after novel, focus on male characters, with women playing only marginal, often stereotypical roles as either monsters or victims?” (277), this gut reaction to a lesbian author idealizing men at the expense of her fellow women explains more about how readers understand identity and its political consequences than about where Renault really stood on the gender issue.

The Alexander Trilogy is an interesting site to explore gender in Renault’s works not only because of its set of female characters that are either “monsters or victims,” but because of the genre of historical fiction itself. The very choice to write in the historical fiction genre entails the marginality of female characters and speaking through the masculine voice of history. The historical novel is gendered not just by its focus on “masculinity and the state,” as Abraham explains to be about great battles, leaders, thinkers, and artists (68), but also by its positioning of the author as a mere vessel for historical accuracy. Ruth Hoberman suggests that the gathering of historical data necessary to the genre implies a “submission to authority” and “bearing the word” (Gendering Classicism 10). To write in a genre that conventionally concerns itself with grand historical events and which usually prevents a more intimate and creative voice does not leave much room for female characters that readers like Bushell expects from a lesbian writer.
Renault’s treatment of female characters often appears to leave little space for redemptive interpretation. The most notable female villains in the Alexander Trilogy are the women who are most closely bound to Alexander’s power: his mother Olympias and his first wife Roxane. Both women are portrayed as beautiful but murderous femme fatales whose sole concern in life is to secure their social status through marriage, offsprings, and the death of others. While Olympias is depicted to have plotted her husband’s demise, Roxane tries to poison Alexander’s Persian eunuch and brutally murders his second wife after his death, for fear that the latter’s child would usurp the throne. Their characterization can be summarized by a misogynistic comment of a male character in *Funeral Games*: “Women! They make war seem like a holiday” (263). In a different context, these historical women could very well be strong female characters who unfortunately fail to survive a patriarchal world. But Renault’s novels are so fundamentally romantic that these women merely provide foils to the pure, disinterested love and devotion between male (or eunuch) characters.

Discussing Renault’s “negative” portrayal of women does not make sense unless placed in the context of the “heroic gay men” that dominate the spotlight in the Alexander Trilogy. Female characters are either impediments or facilitators to the love and friendship between men, while being excluded from the very concept of love—homosexual or heterosexual. Renault suggests multiple times throughout the trilogy that Olympias causes Alexander’s allegedly exclusive homosexual orientation by being a
Freudian matriarch: “All through his boyhood she had made him hate his father… she’d shown him marriage as the poisoned shirt of Heracles… then, when he’s reached the age for girls and could have had his pick, she was outraged that he’d taken refuge with another boy…. she could not live with what she’d brought about” (Funeral Games 111).

In Renault’s interpretation of the historical character of Olympias, the mother is both an enabler and a destructive force for Alexander’s relationship with other men. Olympias’ characterization exists solely in relation to her son’s homosexuality.

Alexander is, as appropriate to the time period, depicted as bisexual. Also appropriate for the period is how his desire for men is described as qualitatively different from his desire for women. This is demonstrated in the trilogy as his relationship with women is always predicated on political maneuvers, in contrast to his disinterested love affairs with both Hephaestion and Bagoas, the Persian eunuch. In The Persian Boy, this contrast is taken to the extreme where Alexander decides to marry the late Darius’ daughter, Stateira, while having his lover Hephaestion marry Drypetis, Stateira’s sister. In this instance, women are not just pawns of state marriages and tools for breeding, but also facilitators of a biological connection between male lovers: “Hephaestion will marry Stateira’s sister. I should like his children to be my kin” (349).

The fact that the transcendentally beautiful love between Alexander and Hephaestion is testified by Alexander’s wish to establish kinship between them, which requires two women and their wombs to realize, is perhaps the most disturbing aspect
of Renault’s writings. When homophile depictions are juxtaposed with, and sometimes predicated upon, sexist depictions of women, it is particularly disorienting to evaluate an author like Renault. The conundrum is exacerbated by her supposed identity as a lesbian woman: while a “misogynistic gay pioneer” can perhaps be tolerated in a man in a “less progressive” time period with uneasiness, the same combination of political stances in a lesbian woman is unthinkable for critics. In this sense, Renault embodies the crisscrossing of political affinities outlined in Eve Sedgwick’s “Across Genders, Across Sexualities” in unexpected ways: her “alliance and cross-identification” (60) along the axis of sexuality excludes her alliance on the axis of gender.

There is but one female character in the Alexander novels that has the potential to meet the feminist expectations of Renault’s critics. Eurydike, King Philip’s granddaughter and Alexander’s half-nephew, is one of the central characters in the last book of the trilogy, *Funeral Games* (1981). Eurydike is portrayed as a fifteen-year-old girl who is unconventionally athletic and boyish in appearance: “In her bright helmet and gold-studded cuirass, her knee-high kilt of scarlet wool above her shining greaves, she looked a gallant figure…. she looked like a boy actor in a play, masked to enact the young Achilles at Aulis” (*Funeral Games* 278). She is masculine not only in appearance but in her ambition to take over Alexander’s reign after his death, since “this was her nature and her fate, to ride to victory like a king, her land behind her and her horseman at her side” (274).
Instead of turning Eurydike into a modern feminist figure, however, Renault establishes Eurydike’s gallantry and heroism upon her revulsion toward femininity. There is no possibility of alliance between Eurydike and other women because “she should have been a boy,” and “all her training and her nature rebelled at being laid aside with slaves and women…. she felt women an alien species, imposing no laws upon her…. The truth is that she would not endure the tedium of female talk” (118, 193).

The strong, positive character of Eurydike is thereby the least feminist character possible: her strength is based on her alienation from and debasement of the female sex.

Renault’s most painful scene about Eurydike’s relationship with her sex takes place after she marries Alexander’s mentally disabled half-brother. Eurydike marries him with the political intention to claim the throne as the Queen of Macedon, and she is faced with an opportunity to address the assembly and defend her legitimacy. But just as the critical moment approaches, her menstruation starts unexpectedly:

Her hands had clenched, her back and her shoulders tightened; her stomach contracted, achingly. The aching turned to a cramp, a low heavy drag which, with dismay, she tried at first not to recognize. In vain; it was true. Her menses not due for four days, had started.

She had always counted carefully, always been regular. How could it happen now? It would come on quickly, once began, and she had not put on a towel.

She had been strung-up this morning; what had she failed to notice in all the stress? Already she felt a warning moisture. If she stood on the rostrum, everyone would see. (236)

In this clash between public political intrigue and private physical sensation, Renault presents a rare depiction of an intimate moment in a woman’s everyday life, from the
character’s perspective and between her legs, a moment that does not appear anywhere else in the trilogy. Contrary to many critics’ opinion, Renault is never evasive about sex, but sexual sensations in the trilogy are almost invariably described from the perspective of male characters. This is the only scene in which a woman faces her uniquely female physical sensations and contemplates its significance. But indeed, Eurydike’s response to her menstruation again turns out to be that of repugnance and self-loathing:

Why, among all these human made by the gods, was she alone subject to this betrayal, she only who could be chased by her body at a great turn of fate?

Besides her sat Philip, with his useless gift of a strong man’s frame. If she had owned it, it would have carried her up to the rostrum and given her voice of bronze. Now she must creep from the field without a battle; and even her well-wishers would think, Poor girl! (236)

Eurydike laments that the “gallant boy” that she should have been is reduced to a “poor girl” by her own female body. And when she decides that this “betrayal” is unavoidable, she admits defeat by surrendering to the femininity that she despises:

She had come, the morning being fresh, with a himation round her shoulders. Now, carefully, she slipped it down to her elbows, to drape in a curve over her buttocks, as elegant ladies wore it in fresco paintings. Getting to her feet, taking care over her draperies, she said, “I do not wish to address the Macedonians.” (236-37)

This spectacular inner struggle of the only complex female character throughout the trilogy comes to a bitter end through Eurydike’s succumbing to her femaleness, and the fact that Renault provides this psychological depth to her only reinforces the bleakness of her depiction of women. While Sweetman usually comes to Renault’s defense for her problematic politics, on this scene he comments that Renault “makes it abundantly clear
that she has no time for a woman in a man’s world…. we are left in no doubt that it is
[Eurydike’s] very womanhood that renders her inadequate” (292).

It is, of course, possible to interpret a scene like this to be the opposite of what it
appears to be. Eurydike’s self-loathing could be read as a violent protest against the
patriarchal society that condemns women to feeling betrayed by their own bodies. But
again, critiques of Renault’s misogyny only ever make sense when placed in the context
of the author’s increasing idealization of masculinity and male homosexuality. The
unilateral malevolence of Olympias and Roxane and the tragic defeat of Eurydike fail to
register with Renault’s readers as social critique because they reinforce the superiority of
masculinity and the idealization of male bonding in the novels rather undermine it.

Renault’s problematic treatment of women could be attributed to generic
constraints in historical accuracy. Sweetman comes to Renault’s defense on the issue by
suggesting that Renault would consider it “no business of hers to pretend” that the
ancient people she depicts did not belong to a “violent male-dominated culture” (294).
However, not only is writing in the historical genre a conscious choice39 (and a shocking
one for Renault’s publisher and her readers at the time), Renault has also demonstrated
unexpected complexities and depths in her portrayal of race and class, consciousness of
which were supposedly as premodern in ancient Greece as gender.

39 Hoberman also makes a point about historical fiction being a conscious choice for both Renault and
Marguerite Yourcenar. She asks: “Why choose a genre and setting so uncongenial to the depiction of female
experience?” (Gendering Classicism 74)
Hoberman suggests through Marguerite Yourcenar’s explanation of her own male-dominated *Memoirs of Hadrian* that women “could not possibly be plausible subjects for historical fiction because their lives were so secret and limited” (*Gendering Classicism* 73-74). But Renault has in fact created one of her most complex and sympathetic characters out of an obscure historical figure whose life was also “secret and limited,” if not more so than women—Bagoas the Persian eunuch. If Renault has the poetic license to create a voice for a foreign slave in ancient Greece, which makes for one of the most unique characters in her oeuvre, it is a stretch to claim that it is impossible to write about the secret lives of women simply because of genre restrictions. The absence and denigration of women in Renault’s works is a conscious choice, as it is in BL fantasies, and serves purposes other than simple representation.

I argue that instead of looking for justifications in genre, interpretation, or even in the author’s time period, Renault’s misogyny needs to be read as it is—as a denial of *her own* sex. It is impossible to know what Renault really thought about women (although Sweetman’s biography provides several clues) and how she reconciled that with her lesbianism, but it is clear that misogyny is a position she has taken on as an author. If misogyny is not as salient in her earlier novels, it certainly is so when “she finally gave up the attempt [to write about women] and began to write about men who did not need women at all” (Sweetman 293). Her *unwriting* of women since *The Charioteer*, just as her shift to a subject that is distinctly disengaged from her
contemporary world of mid-twentieth century, is an attempt to disidentify from the here and now.

This distantiation strategy could indeed have served the practical function of avoiding exposure and censorship, as suggested by Gay Wachman. But to interpret her distantiation as strictly a reluctant necessity is to suggest that she would have written about her own sex, time, and place if she had a choice, if she had been in a less sexist and homophobic age, which she herself clearly denies. Indeed, criticism cannot be based solely upon an author’s confession, but Renault’s persistent denial of her writing as a camouflage suggests other paths be taken to understand her distantiation. What critics have not been able to do is to read her distantiation and disidentification as they are, not for the sake of deflecting from a truth, but for the sake of disengaging from the here and now, of a fantastical desire for the elsewhere.

Renault’s preoccupation with male homosexuality turns it into an elsewhere to which she directs her heroic and romantic fantasies, a sexuality that excludes the author in much the same way that BL fans positions themselves to be distanced and excluded from their erotic fantasies. Renault’s idealization of male homosexuality in ancient Greece is less politically baffling when it is understood as a fantasy rather than as an oblique comment on either modern homosexuality or her own lesbianism.

In the following section, I examine The Persian Boy separately, but also within BL aesthetics and logic. The titular character, the Persian eunuch Bagoas, is according to Sweeetman Renault’s “most unusual historico-fictional character—a Persian eunuch was hardly the most obvious narrator for an epic tale of war and conquest” (263–64). This unique choice of character not only bears a nominal proximity to Boys’ Love, but it is my interpretation that the Persian boy is also best read as a BL figure.

III. The Persian Boy as a Boys’ Love Figure

The Persian Boy (1972) is the second book of the Alexander Trilogy. While the other two parts of the trilogy adopt a detached third-person point of view, The Persian Boy is narrated by the titular character, the Persian eunuch Bagoas. As I mentioned earlier, the fact that Renault gives a character like Bagoas (a foreigner, a eunuch, a king’s plaything) narrative authority defeats the argument that women cannot be plausible subjects of historical fiction because they lived secret lives in silence. For a position that was understood, like women, to be a “non-citizen” in ancient Greek societies, it would be as unimaginable for a foreign eunuch to have a voice as it was for a woman. The unusual choice of Bagoas as a narrator therefore needs to be read as Renault’s conscious intervention into both the historical genre and the constructions of gender.

Bagoas as a eunuch is at the center of radical interpretations of Renault’s works. If reading Alexander or Hephaistion as gay risks anachronism, the obsolete practice of gelding makes Bagoas a more pliable material for metaphorizing and politicizing.
Sweetman, for example, refers to Bagoas’ gender as female in quotation marks, and suggests that Bagoas “seems to represent for Mary a solution to the problem of gender by being, like T. S. Eliot’s Tiresias, of neither, yet of both sexes at once” (294). The idea that Bagoas represents an intermediate gender that defies definition is supported by Hoberman, who describes Bagoas as “incarnation of sexual duplicity,” who “defies inscription as either male or female” (“Masking the Phallus” 291). The supposed androgyny of Bagoas is a welcoming surprise for Renault’s critics to see gender nonconformity in a series of writings that appear to have succumbed to sexism in its least redeemable iterations.

*The Persian Boy* takes the form of Bagoas recounting his life up to the death of Alexander. From his traumatizing experience of being gelded at ten, sold into prostitution, and later becoming concubines of Darius and Alexander successively, Renault created the character based on a few scattered historical references to Alexander’s Persian eunuch. As gelding was a practice unique to Persia at the time, Bagoas is considered an anomaly and a spectacle to Macedonians in the novel, just as the character would be for Renault’s modern readers. Bagoas describes the harassment he encounters when he first joins Alexander’s army, as the “mannerless” Macedonians would try to take a peek at him in the “privies,” since although “[a]ny Persian boy has satisfied his curiosity about eunuchs before he is six years old,” for Macedonians “grown men supposed one had been cut down to the shape of a woman” (116). For both
contemporary Macedonians and twentieth-century readers, the sexual truth of Bagoas is a mystery through which childish curiosity is satisfied through Renault’s textual voyeurism.

If Bagoas is understood by contemporary Macedonians to be a monstrosity, he is a beautiful monster. In Funeral Games, the final book of the trilogy, he is retroactively described as having “the famous beauty which had dazzled two kings running” (12). In The Persian Boy, as a narrator, his appearance reflects off of reactions from his lovers, such as when Darius “did not believe that for beauty all Asia contained my equal” and when Alexander tells Bagoas after seeing his army of Persian youth: “I never saw so much beauty in one day; but still I picked the best” (356). Bagoas’ beauty appears to belong to no particular gender, as Nabarzanes comments that Bagoas is “the most lovely creature my eyes have rested on; woman, girl, or boy” (103-104).

While it may be more comfortable to read Bagoas as a positive instance of gender transgression in Renault’s novels, Renault makes it clear in the novel that Bagoas does not occupy any neutral ground between or beyond the sexes. Just as Eurydike, the warrior queen defeated by her own menstruation, Bagoas laments lost chances for him to both “become a man” and to beget sons because he was captured and gelded. He wishes that he could have joined his father when he says that “I would have my manhood, if it had not been taken away…. I would be with him now among our
warriors, laughing together and making ready to die” (55). Gelding is a violence done to him to prevent him from masculinity, much as being born female is to a woman.

It is therefore not surprising that while Bagoas admits that there are eunuchs who “become women,” he himself is adverse to the suggestion that he might be one of them (40). When Alexander refuses to take him along to war, he protests that “[j]ust because we have women’s voices, it doesn’t mean we have women’s strength,” and Alexander reassures him that he does not even have a woman’s voice because it is “too pure. It’s like the autos, the deep-toned flute” (273). While eunuchs exist outside of the gender binary, Renault leaves little doubt that Bagoas’ regret toward an unattainable sex is never oriented toward a desire to be female.

Reading Bagoas’ gender is similar to reading Gilbert’s in Kaze to ki no uta: if Gilbert is portrayed as a beautiful boy whose genitals are often loosely drawn or left blank, Bagoas literally has his genitals cut off against his will and as a result, remains a beautiful boy throughout adulthood. Much as the way Gilbert is read as “genderqueer,” Bagoas’ androgynous appearance as Renault describes can also easily be interpreted as queer/transgender. But as my critique of reading Gilbert as queer, I also contend that the character Bagoas requires a much closer examination. If Gilbert’s maleness remains central to both his characterization and the entire genre convention, Renault also portrays Bagoas with an irreducible maleness, which is what allows the relationship between Alexander and Bagoas to remain homoerotic.
Bagoas’ position as a slave and therefore outside of power also distinguishes him from the female characters. In the novel, his disengagement from power is self-inflicted, since for other eunuchs the lust for power can become overwhelming (4). Bagoas describes his own relation to power as “I have never craved for power, as some eunuchs do; only for love” (223). Bagoas as a character of pure romance sets him apart from the women for whom the possibility of love is devoured by their thirst for power or mere survival. While for Alexander’s sister Kleopatra, her husband is more a “colleague” than a lover, and for Eurydike her marriage is a “grotesque necessity” (Funeral Games 153, 193), Bagoas’ love for Alexander is free from all shackles of power and status: “he had been a hunted man with a king’s price on his head, I would have gone barefoot with him through Asia, starved with him, lain down in the market stews to buy him bread” (The Persian Boy 176).

Upon Alexander’s imminent death, Alexander’s wife Roxane is portrayed as a premature widow, because the husband is but a warrant of her status: “[f]or her, for the child within her, he was already dead. She began to wail…. burying her face in the sheet, hardly aware of the hot, still living flesh beneath it” (Funeral Games 25). In contrast, Bagoas demonstrates a “profound and private grief in its priestlike austerity” when faced with Alexander’s death, because his love for the King is his sole concern (126). The centrality of romance in the character of Bagoas produces a space outside of historical narrative and its conventional focus on power and conquest. When Bagoas
says “What was Macedon to me, what did I care who ruled it?” he marks the genre of the book as romance by negating the very premise of the historical genre. By opening up an amatory space beyond historical narrative through Bagoas, Renault creates the ultimate fantasy figure: Bagoas is beyond both gender and his genre, living outside of categories and power-relations, and whose position within the narrative is that of a narrator who is also the perpetual alien and the non-citizen.

Bagoas’ gender is significant not only in how it is perceived as a barbarian novelty in the trilogy, but also in how it would be read by the trilogy’s modern readers. For Renault’s post-1970’s Western readers, the eunuch as a gender is not defined by anatomy or by socialization, but by time. Bagoas is neither transsexual nor transgender—he is forced to renounce his manhood, which is directly correlated with futurity in the context of the novels. Bagoas is a character from the ancient past without a future. He is thereby a character stuck in time, the ultimate fantasy that has no anchorage in either the narrative time or the reader’s time.

Bagoas is described by Renault to be the eternal boy: he explains that “the gelding must have given some shock that changed me…. all my life [I] have kept the shape of a boy” (The Persian Boy 11). Even in his twenties, at Alexander’s deathbed, he is described as “ageless,” and “of no particular age” although he must have been twenty-four years old (Funeral Games 144). To have a character outside of time narrate a historical novel, which implies the passage of time, is perhaps Renault’s most fascinating
comment on both genre and the speculations about her shift from one to another. For Renault, her historical novels are never an allegory for modern times nor a camouflage for her real identitarian concerns, but an elsewhere that is always already lost. With a past that has no future, Renault portrays a fantasy whose sole significance to her and her readers’ realities is its difference from the here and now.

Renault’s fictional preoccupation with romance between men was pioneering for the English-speaking world in mid-twentieth century. Her choice to situate the romance in the distant past, away from the political spotlight on the very topic in her contemporary world, however, has excluded her novels from what is understood as “gay classics” today. Anxiety about authenticity and agency is further heightened by what is understood to be Renault’s own gender and sexuality, when a lesbian author who writes about male homosexuality can only make sense as “closet writing,” an unfortunate product of the pre-Stonewall, pre-liberation world.

While Renault’s works have inspired and then disillusioned her contemporary gay readers and her lesbian feminist critics successively, they have also found an unlikely affinity in slash/BL fans in recent years. The centrality of the “boy” in both Renault’s homoerotic romance and Boys’ Love is anything but a coincidence: the figure of the boy signifies a temporality outside of gender, sexual, and political definitions, and in both Renault and slash/Boys’ Love, the love for and of the boy constitutes a romantic narrative detached from identitarian agendas.
Renault’s desire for disidentification seeks neither to disguise a “true” identity nor to radically transform mainstream ideologies. Her disidentification is motivated by an evasion of the here and now, a hopeless idealization of otherness, and a desire for an elsewhere that is forever out of reach. It is also this elusive quality of the object of desire that creates the serial identifications and disidentifications, the backward gazes through time performed by Renault’s characters, Renault herself, and her fans.

The reason why fantasy is a better context to understand this serial desire for otherness than queerness is because queerness is antithetical to fantasy: despite its diverse strategies to challenge identity constructions including its own, queerness is defined as a radical political project. Disidentification as a mechanism of BL fantasy, on the other hand, is a rejection of an identity through which political agendas can be exercised. Reading Renault and the desires within and without her works in terms of fantasy provides an opportunity to examine her very rejection of possibility: by insisting to remove the self from the here and now, Renault’s works construct a sexuality that has no future but amorously beholds an infinite number of pasts.
Chapter 3: Marguerite Yourcenar’s Japanese Shoes: Cross-identification and the Pleasure of Misreading

As the first woman elected to the Académie française, the literary institution founded in 1635 and boasting three hundred years of male exclusivity, Marguerite Yourcenar never attached herself to the label of a “woman writer.”¹ Having shared a lifelong companionship with another woman, Grace Frick, Yourcenar had also been resistant to a lesbian identity, and had said that she detested the word homosexuality and never used it in her publications.² To the chagrin of her critics, Yourcenar never appeared to have stood in solidarity with the political causes that she represented so triumphantly to some.

In many ways, Yourcenar resembles and has indeed been compared to Mary Renault:³ born only two years apart (Yourcenar in 1903 and Renault in 1905), the authors both went through the turmoil of the two world wars, which contributed to their self-imposed exiles: Yourcenar to the United States, and Renault to South Africa. Both saw

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¹ Yourcenar has expressed her resistance to the category of “woman writer” in multiple instances, which Luce Irigaray summarizes, when comparing Yourcenar to Marguerite Duras, that both authors “have publicly declared that they write as asexuate subjects, and that being a writer has nothing to do with the fact of being a woman” (104). See Luce Irigaray, Luce Irigaray: Key Writings. Continuum, 2004.
² François-Marie Samuelson, “Marguerite Yourcenar,” Le Figaro Magazine 31 October 1980: 82, qtd. in Alesch 208. Alesch notes that Yourcenar did use the word homosexualité in her private communications.
³ Kevin Kopelson, for example, has a chapter dedicated to comparing Renault and Yourcenar in Love’s Litany (1994). Gay Wachman, in her Lesbian Empire (2001), also mentions the two authors side by side, with the addition of Bryher, since all three are categorized as lesbian authors in the historical genre (1, 39). The two authors were also brought up together unfavorably theatre critic Eric Bentley in an interview, where he comments that both authors derive authorial prestige by writing about powerful men in history (qtd. in Rousseau 123).
the rise of identity politics and gay rights movements in their middle age, and both expressed distaste toward this politicization of sexuality. Despite having been in a lifelong relationship with another woman, both rejected the lesbian label and if not more so, the category of the lesbian writer. Their disavowal of identitarian categories have invited similar critiques of their problematic politics. Although as a decorated literary figure and an *immortelle* (and perhaps also being French), Yourcenar is subjected to less scrutiny of her (lack of) political alliances, both authors have, in short, the bad objects of literary studies at least since the 1980s.

At the center of critical discomfort surrounding the two authors is their preoccupation with male homosexuality in their works. In contrast to the lack of lesbian visibility in their texts, homosexual male presence dominates both Yourcenar and Renault’s most celebrated works. And instead of writing about gay culture in their contemporary England, France, the U.S., or South Africa, both authors locate their accounts of male homosexuality in ancient times. It was their displacement of modern homosexuality—and as many suspected, the authors’ own sexualities—onto a distant time and place that led critics to draw parallels between the two authors. Renault’s

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4 Renault, of course, did write about male homosexuality in a contemporary setting in her 1953 novel *The Charioteer*, but the novel is often understood as a watershed between her contemporary and historical novels, and Renault never turned back to the modern times after *The Charioteer*.

5 Kopelson, for example, comments that Yourcenar’s *Memoirs of Hadrian* is “the story of an emperor who loved a beautiful boy,” and Renault’s *Persian Boy* is “the story of a beautiful boy who loved an emperor (105).
portrayal of Alexander the Great and Yourcenar’s portrayal of the Roman emperor

Hadrian have been a constant source of both admiration and bewilderment: that two of
the historical fiction genre’s finest creations came from lesbian authors, who portray the
characters as relentless lovers of men.

In what follows, I examine the critical unease around Yourcenar, especially in
terms of her thorny relationship with feminist politics and what is assumed to be her
identification with masculine authority. I read her position on the gender issue as one of
disidentification and cross-identification, and this is demonstrated through my close
reading of her most famous work: *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951). I argue that besides gender,
hers dis/cross-identification also functions on a cultural terrain. By turning to her
writings about Japan and how Japan writes back to her, I theorize a seriality
surrounding Renault’s works that is fantastical in nature.

**I. Yourcenar’s Resistance to Identity Politics**

Yourcenar is a legendary figure in French literature, and her joining the
Académie française in 1980 made news in literary circles worldwide, because she was
the first woman ever to be elected into the elite intellectual council. Born in Brussels in
1903, Yourcenar began her literary career with *Alexis* (1929), a story about a young
husband struggling with his homosexuality. At the outbreak of WWII, Yourcenar moved
to the U.S. to live with Grace Frick, who is a literary scholar, Yourcenar’s later English
translator and also partner for almost half a century, until Frick’s death in 1979.
Although Yourcenar spent the majority of her life in the U.S., Yourcenar wrote in French throughout her life, and has rarely written about immediate environment she was in.

It comes as a surprise for critics that with her illustrious career and a massive oeuvre, Yourcenar is not as frequently discussed as would be expected for her fame, especially in the Anglo-American world. Critical writings about Yourcenar in the English language often begin with an apology about the relative obscurity of the author in recent years. As is my contention about the silence around Renault in the past few decades, the lack of attention to Yourcenar has less to do with literary trends or language barriers, and has much more to do with her uneasy relationship with identity politics and radical academic discourses.

Yourcenar’s now notorious quote about historical fiction, which I cited in the previous chapter, is paradigmatic of the kind of comments that antagonize her critics. In her postscript to *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Yourcenar explains, perhaps in defense against complaints about the lack of female characters in her other works, that it is “virtually impossible, to take a feminine character as a central figure, to make Plotina, for example, rather than Hadrian, the axis of my narrative. Women’s lives are much too limited, or else too secret” (327). George Rousseau says that this comment “cost her a great deal among feminist and gay readers,” and has since been interpreted as Yourcenar’s

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6 George Rousseau’s 2004 book on Yourcenar, for example, begins by stating that the “sad truth about Marguerite Yourcenar is that many readers will need to ask who she was. In France her name is still a household word but not in the Anglo-American world” (1).
misogynistic view about women in general.\textsuperscript{7} Ruth Hoberman states that if the historical genre makes it impossible to write about women, then the question is why choose a genre “so uncongenial to the depiction of female experience?”\textsuperscript{8}

Yourcenar’s critics do not object to the statement itself: in terms of the historical period, at least in Yourcenar’s chosen setting, it is indeed technically more challenging to write about a woman than about a well-documented man such as Hadrian. Nor do critics disapprove of Memoirs of Hadrian on its own, or the topic as a valid, ambitious choice. What makes critics, or the “feminist and gay readers” that Rousseau describes unhappy about Yourcenar, is the combination of the way Yourcenar chooses to present her genre of choice and who/what the author is assumed to be. It is because Yourcenar is known to be a lesbian (or on some accounts, bisexual) woman that her choice of writing in the male-dominant genre of historical fiction without giving it a feminist twist that is problematic for her critics.

Yourcenar’s texts reflect her lack of intention to represent positive female characters. In Anne F. Garréta and Josyane Savigneau’s conversation about Yourcenar and French lesbian writing, they comment on the absence of both desirable women and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{7} George Rousseau, \textit{Yourcenar}. Haus, 2004, p. 119.
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Ruth Hoberman, \textit{Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth Century Women’s Historical Fiction}. State University of New York Press, 1997, p. 74. Hoberman here asks a rhetorical question, which is nevertheless a genuine one for many critics of Yourcenar and Renault.
\end{itemize}
women with a “heroic destiny” in Yourcenar’s vast number of works.9 Lorna Milne asks if Yourcenar is “quite simply an unquestioning proponent of patriarchal discourse,” since her portrayal of women through Hadrian’s eyes is “all artifice and no essence.”10 When women are granted center stage in Yourcenar works, they are often assigned a tragic end, where they are reminded of the unfortunate fate of being a woman.

In *Fires* (1936), a book of modern retellings of ancient Greek mythological tales and figures, Yourcenar uncharacteristically focuses mainly on female characters. In “Achilles, or the Lie,” Yourcenar creates an original character Misandra, who is an athletic young girl, a friendly rival to Achilles, and whose name means “man hater.” Similar to Euridike in Renault’s *Funeral Game*, however, Misandra ends up being a “prisoner of her breasts” [prisonnière de ses seins] and fulfills her fate of being a foil to Achilles (20-21). Women’s breasts appear again as the epitome of female plight in “Patroclus,” where Penthesilea, the Amazon queen, is portrayed as the only woman of her tribe to cut off one of her breasts, presumably to escape the tragic fate of female anatomy. This seemingly lesbian-feminist character is subjected to Achilles “iron rape” —she is penetrated and killed by Achilles’ blade (32). On these scenes in *Fires*, Katherine King comments on the “masculinist workings” of Renault’s retelling of

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Homer’s texts, not only in the tragic fate of the female characters, but also in how their
death only serves to highlight Achilles’ failed attempt to understand the female mind.\textsuperscript{11}

What Yourcenar faces is identitarian expectations for a proper alignment
between one’s identity, writing, and politics. And Yourcenar has not been reticent about
her disapproval of this line of thinking. In her interviews with Matthieu Galey, she
spoke openly about having “strong objections to feminism as it now presents itself.”\textsuperscript{12}
And if there are doubts about whether she meant that as an insider critique of
feminism’s latest developments, she also generalized the statement by saying that she
was “opposed to particularism, whether it is based on nationality, religion, or species. So
don’t count on me to support sexual particularism either.”\textsuperscript{13} These nearly incendiary
comments are bound to make her unpopular with her contemporary feminists, if not for
critical literary studies for the past few decades in general.

On a closer look, however, Yourcenar was never against activism per se, and she
claimed that she was an active supporter of organizations involved in women’s rights.\textsuperscript{14}
She was “strongly in favor of equal rights for women,” and when it comes to education,
she was “of course in favor of equality between the sexes.”\textsuperscript{15} Instead of claiming that

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\textsuperscript{12} Marguerite Yourcenar and Matthieu Galey, \textit{With Open Eyes: Conversations with Matthieu Galey}. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Beacon Press, 1984, p. 221.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
critics have taken her words out of context, however, I contend that Yourcenar’s detractors are not mistaken about her position. What Yourcenar is against is not women’s rights or gender equality—she is against the assumption that because she is a woman, and on top of that a woman with a respected public voice, she ought to be an advocate for her own sex. She is against identity politics as a political imperative.

**II. Reading Yourcenar Through Fantasy**

In *Memoirs of Hadrian*, the distanitiation provided by the historical genre and by the misogynistic depiction of women is similar to the structure of fantasy that I discussed in chapter one, where a seemingly masochistic denigration of the self is not only essential to establishing a genre about otherness, but also the very source of pleasure that the genre provides. While Yourcenar does not use the word escapism to describe *Memoirs*, her suggestion of the book’s “sympathetic magic” that “transports” and immerses the self in a different place and time (328-29), her advice to “[k]eep one’s own shadow out of the picture; leave the mirror clean of the mist of one’s own breath” (331), and her idealization of ancient Rome’s unbridled freedom all encourage an escapist reading of her text.\(^\text{16}\) Fantasy, especially BL fantasy, requires not just a suspension of disbelief, but also a suspension of the definition of the self. By attempting

\(^{16}\) Original of the first quotation reads « Un pied dans l’érudition, l’autre dans la magie, ou plus exactement, et sans métaphore, dans cette magie sympathique qui consiste à se transporter en pensée à l’intérieur de quelqu’un » (322).
to erase her authorial presence as much as possible from her text (which is itself, of course, an authorial move), by emptying out the self, Yourcenar was able to contract the distance between herself and the emperor, to attempt to become Hadrian.

In her postscript Yourcenar comments on the “utter fatuity of those who say to you, ‘By “Hadrian” you mean yourself!’” even though she says in another fragment later that “[e]very being who has gone through the adventure of living is myself” (340, 342). The seeming contradiction between the two statement is from the unique process of disidentification that takes place in Yourcenar’s writing: while the author’s personal identifications could be seamlessly superimposed upon the emperor (or “every being who has gone through the adventure of living”), her textual identification is painstakingly achieved through what she calls “controlled delirium,” a “sympathetic magic which operates when one transports oneself, in thought, into another’s body and soul” (328-29).

Yourcenar’s Cross-Identification

In Memoirs, the desire to both identify with and possess, to become and to manipulate otherness coexists with the desire to disidentify from categories of the self. With the addition of her confessional, semi-autobiographical postscript, where Yourcenar lays out her reflections on the composition of the book, these delicate negotiations between self and otherness, desire and identification, and idealism and escapism within the text are intimately intertwined with the author’s relationship with
both her characters and her textual “self.” Perhaps feeling that the temporality of

*Memoirs* as historical fiction demands her to defend the temporality of her own

identifications, Yourcenar narrates the issue of her relationship with Hadrian and with

the past in various, often self-contradictory fragments.

By Yourcenar’s own account, the writing of *Memoirs* was not a linear process. She

explains that the idea for it and her initial manuscripts first appeared between 1924 and

1929, after which the manuscripts were discarded (*Memoirs* 319). She then worked on the

book intermittently during the thirties, but it was not until after WWII, when Yourcenar

retrieved a lost trunk that contained her manuscript for *Memoirs*, that the book began to

take shape. The way the book travels through time, in a physical sense, but also in terms

of its genre and its main character’s narrative of his history, evokes a past that refuses to

be seen as an alterity. Yourcenar addresses the question of time and the distance that it

implicates in her postscript as such: the actions that take place in her narrative, just as

the statues that survived the centuries, “are still living in a past time, a time that has died,”

but “some five and twenty aged men, their withered hands interlinked to form a chain,

would be enough to establish an unbroken contact between Hadrian and ourselves”

(321). This idea of an “unbroken contact” across time appears in several other fragments

throughout the postscript—several pages later, Yourcenar comments again that one can

“contract the distance between centuries at will” (330).
The immediacy of the past and the lack of distance between Hadrian’s temporality and her own are central to Yourcenar’s self-defense regarding her generic decision. It appears that for her, historical fiction does not involve writing about a radically different world than the author’s own, nor is historical fiction fundamentally different from another literary genre. Regarding genres, she writes that “[t]hose who put the historical novel in a category apart are forgetting that what every novelist does is only to interpret, by means of the techniques which his period affords, a certain number of past events” (329). History, in other words, does not impose alterity or otherness for Yourcenar. History is but one end of the unbroken chain that leads to the author, and presumably to the reader as well. Centuries-old history can be accessed directly, without mediation, as if it is opening a lost suitcase that contains a manuscript from one’s past life.

However, another of Yourcenar’s self-defense reveals a decisive alterity of the history she chooses to narrate: in the often-quoted explanation of why she chose to focus on male figures in this book (and in most of her other works as well), where she states that women’s lives are “too limited, or else too secret” (327). Ostensibly referring to women’s lives in the second century, Yourcenar makes the case against her own theory of the unbroken chain of history: there is indeed a decisive break between ancient Roman times and hers, and the break takes the form of gender. Women’s lives in the twentieth century, and indeed, Yourcenar’s own life would not qualify as “too limited”
or “too secret.” Yourcenar’s illustrious literary career is an obvious contrast to the women mentioned in passing in Memoirs, who conceal themselves behind heavy makeup, buried deep in the boudoir, and whose only concern is with their social status in relation to a man. It is the irreducible distance between two temporalities that requires the author to make conscious decisions (begrudgingly or not) about her subject matter.

Yourcenar’s tendency to idealize ancient times also places Hadrian’s world at a distance from her own. She first uses the metaphor of a human foot to explain the immutable nature of humanity: “nothing is more stable than the curve of a heel, the position of a tendon, or the form of a toe” (332). But then she emphasizes that although the foot remains timeless, the environment changes through time: “there are periods when the shoe is less deforming than in others. In the century of which I speak we are still very close to the undisguised freedom of the bare foot” (332). If it is not quite clear what the “we” refers to in this passage, as is often the case with Yourcenar’s use of the first person plural, another passage clarifies that “we” designates the author’s own twentieth century perspective: “This Second Century appeals to me because it was the last century, for a very long period of time, in which men could think and express

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17 The “we” pronoun is present in the original French: « Mais il y a des époques où la chaussure déforme moins. Au siècle dont je parle, nous sommes encore très près de la libre vérité du pied nu » (326).
themselves with full freedom. As for us, we are perhaps already very far from such times as that” (342).19

In this passage, the very reason that Yourcenar chose the second century is precisely its alterity to the present. Instead of crediting the twentieth century with more freedom (compared to the time when women lived secret and limited lives), Yourcenar idealizes the Roman Empire as a time of unlimited freedom, where humanity could take its most primitive shape of a bare foot. Her definition of the second century as belonging to the “last free men” should perhaps be taken literally as freedom for men, especially for male homosexuality, and not for women. But however Yourcenar defines freedom, the past is marked by its distinct contrast from “our” present, from Yourcenar’s “we,” which suggests a mid-twentieth century collective consciousness.

It is hence clear that Yourcenar’s unbroken contact with the past is not an intuitive fact, but something to be achieved, a breach to be mended, indeed, through the very act of writing. Another famous passage from the postscript is her explanation for adopting the first-person narrative, where she admits to writing in the first person “in order to dispense with any intermediary, in so far as possible, even were that intermediary myself” (329). The grammatical intermediary is to be removed so that the

19 Same as above about the use of we, but the translation of freedom slightly departs from the original, which could be more closely translated as the second century being the time of “the last free men” : « Ce IIe siècle m’intéresse parce qu’il fut, pour un temps fort long, celui des derniers hommes libres. En ce qui nous concerne, nous sommes peut-être déjà fort loin de ce temps-là. » (335)
writing subject could approximate a position that is not of her own, a position that is in an exotic, more primitive temporality. Yourcenar’s cross-identification with Hadrian and his time takes place through the genre and its grammar, and through the act of writing itself.

Indeed, Yourcenar confesses that she could not have written the book before the age of forty, since it took her “years to learn how to calculate exactly the distance between the emperor and [her]self” (322). What Memoirs does is bridging that very distance, a process of becoming Hadrian, precisely because the Roman emperor embodies what Yourcenar the twentieth century woman writer is radically not. And what is at stake in this “transport” into “another’s body and soul” (328-9) is the elimination of the intermediary, even when the intermediary is the writing self.

**Yourcenar’s Disidentification from the Self**

The cross-identification that Memoirs embodies is a negotiation with not simply the boundaries of otherness, but also with what defines the self. And Yourcenar does so curiously, as in the BL genre, by self-effacement. If the main text of Hadrian is a story about an emperor, whose life is alien to the author’s own, the postscript is a story of the author herself. In the postscript, Yourcenar reveals intimate details about her private thoughts, and sometimes even about her life: she recalls, in fragments, the process in which Hadrian came into being, her despair with writer’s block, and how the facts of her father’s life are less accessible to her than those of Hadrian’s. With precise dates,
locations, and actions (“In the spring of 1947...I burned the notes,” “In December of 1948 I received from Switzerland a trunk...”), the Yourcenarian paratext is where avid readers could quench their voyeuristic thirst for an author who is notoriously reluctant to reveal herself.20

The intimate “facts” in the postscript (albeit carefully curated by the author) are told in a voice that Carole Allamand describes as “passive” and “impersonal” (88). Allamand points out that grammatically, the subject in the postscript is often the book itself, and the author is referred to either in the third person or in circumlocutions (87). The most distinct grammatical character of the postscript, Allamand comments, is when “the subject of writing vanishes in passive clauses...or in nonsubjective verbal modes” (87). After three hundred pages of scrupulously established absence of the author, when it finally comes to the author’s own personal, private narrative, that narrative is told in an impersonal voice. If the first-person voice in the main text of Memoirs removes the author herself as an intermediary as Yourcenar suggests, then the passive, impersonal voice of her postscript enables this project of self-effacement to persist throughout the entire book. Yourcenar deliberately leaves no room for her self to shine through.

20 Mieke Taat states that at the time of the publication of Memoirs of Hadrian, Yourcenar’s use of the paratext was surprising since it was a “relic of the 1960s” and that Yourcenar amplified her authorial voice at a time when most fiction authors tried to delete traces of theirs. See Mieke Taat, “Is There No Body on the Scene of Writing? Contemporary Conceptions of Textual Practice in/and Yourcenar’s Paratexts,” in Subversive Subjects: Reading Marguerite Yourcenar, eds. Ingeborg Majer O’Sickey and Judith Holland Sarnecki, Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004, p. 101, 160.
In addition to the removal of the narrating voice of the author, Yourcenar also emphasizes that the book bears no dedication. She explains that the book should be dedicated to Grace Frick (who is referred to as “G. F.” in the postscript) but she left it blank since she sensed “a kind of impropriety in putting a personal inscription at the opening of a work where, precisely, I was trying to efface the personal” (342). The intimate voice of Hadrian’s fictional narration of his interiority is therefore achieved through the author’s erasure of herself, to which Yourcenar tirelessly directs her readers’ attention. Yourcenar’s act of self-effacement is paradoxically a demonstration of the mastery of her authorial subjectivity.

In her article on Yourcenar’s paratext, Allamand discusses the simultaneous processes of identification with otherness and disidentification from the self in the postscript of Memoirs. Allamand addresses the common conjecture about Yourcenar’s desire to be a man, which is based on both the overabundance of male characters in her works and the intellectual voice that many critics assume to be a masculine one. Allamand suggests that “writing as a man, or even like a man, isn’t about being a man, but rather results from the radical refusal of being a mother” (96). For Allamand, Yourcenar’s identification with masculinity is but a symptom of her disidentification

from femininity. She further suggests that what Yourcenar disidentifies from is not femininity per se, or even a lesbian identity, but maternity.

Allamand argues that it is to distance herself from the material body of motherhood, and eventually from the trauma of her mother’s death due to her birth, that Yourcenar laboriously manufactures a literary paternity in relation to her works. Instead of narratives that ostensibly originate in the author’s experience and identity, Allamand claims, extending the gendered metaphor of the body, Yourcenar’s works are “conceived,” not “delivered” (92). According to Allamand, Yourcenar’s intellectualism, her masculine (and sometimes masculinist) textual universe, her demonstration of authorial and scholarly mastery in her paratexts, and her distancing from the personal can all be explained by this rejection of not so much femininity, but motherhood—both of her own and the tragic one that was the condition of her existence.

Allamand’s suggestion about Yourcenar’s negation of a reproductive femininity is indeed fascinating. Instead of attributing this negation to Yourcenar’s personal and family history, however, I would read it through BL aesthetics. As I explained in my first chapter, early interpretations of the BL genre focused on its function to produce an escapist sanctuary for women readers. Through the narrative device of the beautiful boy and his homosexuality, women are able to disidentify from the “pollution” of their own sexuality in a severely gender-segregated society. This functional reading of Boys’ Love is similar to Allamand’s interpretation of Yourcenar: for Allamand, the desirability of
masculinity and more importantly, of male homosexuality, are not as relevant as Yourcenar’s desire to escape from herself and her personal history.

On the question of Yourcenar’s relationship with femininity and maternity, Mieke Taat proposes an opposite reading from Allamand’s. While for Allamand, Yourcenar closes the gap between herself and her subject matter by disavowing maternity (or the other way around: disavowing maternity by assimilating herself with the paternal), for Taat, Yourcenar establishes and embodies otherness precisely through the metaphor of a maternal body. Drawing from Yourcenar’s interviews with Matthieu Galey, Taat argues that instead of a metaphor of insemination, where the author puts herself inside characters, Yourcenar prefers the maternal metaphor of nurturing within the body when she discusses her creative process and her relationship with her texts (Taat 110).

Following Julia Kristeva, Taat envisions pregnancy as “cleavage of the subject,” which challenges and deconstructs the unity of the maternal subject (111). While Taat agrees with Allamand on Yourcenar’s textual strategies of self-effacement, she argues that instead of taking place through a negation of the feminine/maternal, Yourcenar’s self-effacement is made possible precisely through her textual “pregnancy.” Rather than subscribing to the binarism of femininity/maternity as the primordial and the somatic

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and masculinity/paternity as the purely intellectual (which characterizes much of Yourcenar criticism that portrays her as a masculine, intellectual writer), Taat suggests that Yourcenar performs a “visceral intelligence” that allows otherness to emerge within one’s own “substance” and to in turn permeate the subject (118).

Taat’s argument challenges the popular perception about Yourcenar’s masculinity by problematizing correlations between identification/disidentification and gender binarism. Self-effacement isn’t predicated upon the denial of one’s own gender: Taat suggests that femininity/maternity could be the very condition for self-effacement and productive deconstruction. What’s worth noting, however, is that both ends of the apparently opposite interpretations about Yourcenar’s authorial gender seek to understand the author’s relationship to the self. While Allamand and Taat represent two polarized views about Yourcenar’s gendered position, they agree upon the author’s curious strategy of self-effacement through asserting the authorial voice. By her voluble paratexts, Yourcenar constructs a stage from which she could masterfully disappear.

**Hadrian’s Cross-identifications**

If Yourcenar’s narration of Hadrian’s story performatively alienates herself to approach the historical emperor (or the other way around), Hadrian’s story, it turns out, is another imbedded narrative about the desire to approximate otherness. Born with Spanish origins, the Roman emperor has been well known for his appreciation of Greek culture. In *Memoirs*, Yourcenar not only emphasizes this aspect of Hadrian, going into
details about the superiority of Greek culture through Hadrian’s eyes, but also associates this cultural idealization with his homosexuality. The central motif in the book—Hadrian’s affection for Antinous, a Greek youth—is closely tied to Hadrian’s own transport to ancient Greece as a simultaneously historical and mythical space.

Hadrian’s relationship with Antinous is compared to, and is indeed often overridden by parallels to love between Greek heroes, especially Achilles and Patroclus. In the text, Hadrian invokes a wide array of Greek deities to express his affection to Antinous: Antinous is at once the “hardy Diana,” the “melancholy Bacchus,” a “vigorous Hermes,” and a “virile Athena” (132). When describing the beauty of the youth, he describes that Antinous “half reclining on a couch, knees upraised, was that same Hermes untying his sandals; it was Bacchus who gathered grapes or tasted for me the cup of red wine; the fingers hardened by the bowstring were those of Eros” (174). In these scenarios, Hadrian himself is Zeus, or “the nude but helmeted Mars taking part in the camp sports, the athletic Hercules who reveled in the feeling of still youthful vigor” (174). The overabundance of allusions to a mythical past is similar to Renault’s portrayal of Laurie’s reveries in The Charioteer, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Renault’s text similarly invokes Greek imagery (“the tents of Troy, the columns of Athens”), as well as a biblical allusion to David and Jonathan (31). And just as Renault’s Laurie is transported away from his erotic initiation into an “exalted dream,” Yourcenar’s Hadrian also admits to being removed from his reality: “Amid so many
fantasies, and surrounded by such wonders, I sometimes forgot the purely human, the boy who vainly strove to learn Latin” (174).

Historically, Hadrian’s fascination with Greek culture is not limited to his idealization of Greek heroic codes. Yourcenar also highlights Hadrian’s philhellenism in various aspects: she describes in great detail his love for the Greek language, Greek philosophy, its visual and literary aesthetics, its democracy, and even its fine cuisine. His admiration of Greek culture is so passionate that in Memoirs, Hadrian is the emperor who lives in a self-imposed cultural exile. Even when his Hellenism was “cause for amusement” and when senators ridiculed him as “the Greekling” (40), Hadrian lives in a state of displacement from the culture into which he was born and his immediate surroundings. In confessional statements about his relationship to Greek culture, Hadrian explains that “[i]t is in Greek that I shall have thought and lived,” and then later, “Athens was coming more and more to be the center of my thought, and my home. I wished to please the Greeks, and also to Hellenize myself as much as possible” (36, 145).

These statements of devotion are not unlike Yourcenar’s own confessions about her relationship with Hadrian the historical figure and the character. If Yourcenar seeks to “transport” herself into “another’s body and soul” by eliminating the self and fully immersing in the second century, her portrayal of Hadrian also depicts the emperor distancing himself from his own here and now to approximate the Greeks, to become
Greek. Just as Yourcenar is never Hadrian himself and dismisses the idea that Hadrian is but a mouthpiece for her ego, Athens needs to be *made a home* through Hadrian’s self-imposed Hellenization—the distance in between needs to be contracted.

**III. Yourcenar’s Cross-identification with Japan**

In Yourcenar’s massive œuvre, there is yet another historical figure with whom Yourcenar is deeply fascinated, and whose reputation is also inseparable from his homosexuality—the Japanese novelist Mishima Yukio. While Yourcenar’s literary persona has been closely tied to Hadrian and the Western classical antiquity, her connection to Japan has received less attention from critics.

**Mishima’s Distance and Proximity**

Yourcenar has long taken an interest in East Asia: in her 1938 *Oriental Tales* (Nouvelles orientales), she based her short stories on the mythical past of both China and Japan, and she also claimed that she had been studying Japanese since she was nineteen years old.\(^{23}\) In 1980, ten years after Mishima’s scandalous suicide, Yourcenar devoted an entire book to the Japanese author, who, according to Michael Wood, seems “almost to be an escapee from Marguerite Yourcenar’s writing, a remote cousin of her Emperor Hadrian.”\(^{24}\) *Mishima: A Vision of the Void* (Mishima ou la vision du vide) was published in French in 1980 and consists of Yourcenar’s studies of Mishima’s life and

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\(^{24}\) Ibid.
works. Unlike *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Yourcenar’s account of Mishima reflects on a figure in a contemporary world, whose distance from Yourcenar is in space and culture rather than time, and is therefore capable of looking back, of returning her fascination, and of revealing the fantastic nature of her amorous gaze.²⁵

*Mishima* is not strictly a biography, since it dwells only sporadically on Mishima’s childhood and then on his death, leaving out most of his adult life. The rest of the book contains Yourcenar’s reflections on Mishima’s important works—mainly *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956), and his final *The Sea of Fertility* tetralogy (1965–1971). This brief book (125 pages in the original French) is neither academic analysis nor biography; if it must belong to a category, it is closer to a fan book, a *dōjinshi* composed of the author’s curiosity and affection for another author.

The word “fan” is in fact used by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, the Japanese translator of *Mishima*, in his afterword to Yourcenar’s text. In a passage expressing his delight at Yourcenar’s interest in Mishima, Shibusawa writes that he was “deeply moved when thinking that Yourcenar has joined the stellar ranks of Mishima’s French literary fans,” which according to him includes André Malraux and André Pieyre de Mandiargues, the

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²⁵ Mishima is Yourcenar’s contemporary, although twenty-two years younger (he was born in 1925) and in Yourcenar’s Japanese translator Shibusawa Tatsuhiko’s words, Yourcenar is “practically Mishima’s mother’s age” (179).
latter of whom translated Mishima’s play set in France, Madame de Sade.\textsuperscript{26} If Yourcenar’s relationship with her literary object of desire is that of a fan’s, it would be easier to understand the fantasies, misreadings, voyeurism, and the desire to approximate—the usual pitfalls of fandom—in her book on Mishima.

Yourcenar begins the book with a statement about the difficulty for her to write about Mishima, adopting her familiar first-person plural: “It is always difficult to judge a great contemporary writer: we lack the proper distance. It is even more difficult to judge him if he belongs to a culture different from our own, a culture colored by our fondness for or distrust of the exotic” (3; emphasis mine).\textsuperscript{27} In this opening passage, Yourcenar sets up a paradox of simultaneously having too little distance (Mishima as a contemporary author) and too much of it (Mishima as Japanese). She also establishes an identity for both her implied reader and herself as an author (and perhaps, a fan)—someone who belongs to a contemporary culture that is very different from Mishima’s mid-to-late-twentieth century Japan.

If the “we/nous” in her postscript for Memoirs of Hadrian refers to a twentieth-century reader, the “we” in Mishima is even more specific: “we” are the twentieth-century Western reader, and by Western, Yourcenar mostly means European instead of

\textsuperscript{26} Shibusawa 176-77, translation my own. The phrase that Shibusawa uses for Mishima’s French literary fans is “フランス文壇における三島ファン,” with the word “ファン” as a direct transliteration of the English word “fan.”

\textsuperscript{27} All page numbers hereon refer to the English translation, unless otherwise noted.
American in this book. In *Mishima*, Yourcenar frequently demonstrates what she understands to be “exotic” episodes in Mishima’s life and fictional works to a hypothetical modern European reader. One such example is her speculation about the hypothetical Western reader’s astonishment at Mishima’s matter-of-fact description of reincarnation in *The Sea of Fertility*. In a quandary similar to her relationship with Hadrian (she inhabits the voice of Hadrian, who should not be identified as herself, without mediation), Yourcenar shares with her implied reader the perplexity toward Mishima’s simultaneous distance and proximity throughout the book.

Although Yourcenar appears to be painfully aware of the pitfalls of writing across cultural identities, for which she preemptively apologizes at the very beginning of the book, the rest of the book claims the proximity rather than the distance of Mishima. Yourcenar explains that as a “true representative of Japan” (un authentique représentant d’un Japon), Mishima is already “violently Westernized” (violemment occidentalisé), so even in the less familiar aspect of Mishima as a Japanese writer, there is already a portion of him (and of Japan) that is “commonplace” to *us* (3).

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28 Regarding a scene of an encounter between the protagonist and a reincarnated character in *The Temple of Dawn*, Yourcenar writes, “This is for any European reader, or for any ‘modern’ reader, an unbelievable episode” « Scène incroyable pour tout lecteur européen, ou simplement ‘modern’ ». The English translation further strengthens the identity between Yourcenar’s “we” and the modern Western/European reader: in a passage discussing the opposition of good and evil in Mishima, Alberto Manguel’s translation reads: “This almost Manichaean opposition of Good and Evil, alien to Far Eastern thought, has, for the modern Western reader, been entirely exhausted in this form: we have seen the real powers of darkness at too close range to be still excited by a romantic evil” (46). The phrase “modern Western reader,” although implied throughout the book, is not present in the original French.
The most distinctive rhetorical move in the book is Yourcenar’s explication of the commonplaceness of Mishima through tireless comparisons of the Japanese author to European literary masters and his plotlines to what could happen everywhere else in the world. Throughout the book, Yourcenar compares Mishima to a wide array of distinguished Western authors such as Balzac, Proust, Camus, Mann, D’Annunzio, and Dickens. Some of these authors are compared to Mishima in their fabrication of aristocratic family origins (Balzac, Proust, Alfred de Vigny, Hugo), some are brought up to explain the mixture of the commercial and the artistic in Mishima’s works (Balzac, Dickens, Hardy, Conrad), and yet others serve as Mishima’s literary influences (Racine, Greek literature, Wilde, D’Annunzio, Mann) (15; 20-22; 24).

Aside from Yourcenar’s usual erudition, these illustrious literary names establish the familiarity of Yourcenar’s subject by placing Mishima firmly among the ranks of European writers (Americans, on the other hand, rarely receive her honorary mentions). According to Yourcenar, Mishima’s works are European in form and in spirit: the structure of Mishima’s novels are more European than Japanese, and both his metaphors and his central motif of good versus evil are “alien to Far Eastern thought” (22; 46; 126). His novels could therefore take place “not only in Japan but almost everywhere else as
well,” in “Paris or New York as well as in Tokyo,” and have the potential to transcend even time (16; 19-20).

Yourcenar does recognize the element of irreducible alterity in Mishima and in the Japan that he represents. The “exoticism” of Mishima—perhaps what had drawn Yourcenar to the author in the first place—coexists with his European familiarity.

Yourcenar’s approach to Mishima’s otherness is the same as the one she demonstrated in Memoirs of Hadrian: contracting the distance through intellectual research and the “sympathetic magic” that is her art of writing.

In Mishima’s nonfiction genre, Yourcenar’s intellectual voice is even more evident than in Memoirs. She criticizes Western critics for misunderstanding Mishima, and in her interview with The New York Times, she points out that what inspired her to write this book was that “[u]ntruths were written about [Mishima] by those who do not know the Japanese.” By distancing herself from “Western critics” who misunderstands Mishima/Japan, Yourcenar aligns herself with otherness by emphasizing her own immediate access to it: not only does she know the language (although she admitted that she didn’t speak Japanese, only “have some vocabulary”), she also visited Mishima’s family and friends, including someone on whom Mishima purportedly based one of his

29 The statement about time is from Yourcenar’s comment on Confessions of a Mask: the novel “fits all young people between 1945 and 1959, not only in Japan but almost everywhere else as well, and, to a certain extent, the youth of today” (16).

characters. By highlighting her intellectual and physical proximity to her object, Yourcenar attempts to render even Mishima’s unique Japaneseness familiar, if only to herself, and not to other Western readers.

**Resexualizing Mishima**

The aspect of Mishima/Japan that is not yet violently Westernized, which Yourcenar describes as “immutable” and “bizarre” (3-4), ranges widely from the traditional theatrical arts to Japanese people’s tolerance of public nudity (40). Like a dedicated teacher, Yourcenar educates her modern Western readers in the strange customs of Mishima’s Japan—a culture in which a “typically Japanese” erotic sensation is aroused by a woman’s exposed neck when wearing a kimono (59). This is Japan of the ancient times, uncanny leftovers of the world of kimonos, Kabuki, and Nōh, a world that is as alien to modern Europe as it is to modern Japan.

The most prominent dimension of Yourcenar’s portrayal of this traditional residue—also most relevant to this dissertation—is her emphasis on its attitude towards homosexuality. In contrast to Mishima’s anxiety over the social disgrace brought on by homosexuality, ancient Japan, Yourcenar claims, was “more relaxed on the subject of

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31 Although Yourcenar mentioned her plan to take the research trip to Japan in her interviews with Matthieu Galey (Yourcenar and Galey 152), she apparently took the trip after the publication of *Mishima*. A footnote concerning the trip was added to the English version, which was published in 1986. The French version does not contain references to the trip. Yourcenar mentions that she visited the abbess of a convent in 1983, who was an acquaintance of Mishima’s and supposedly the model for Satoko in the last volume of *The Sea of Fertility* (93).
one man’s love for another” (18). This traditional tolerance of homosexuality, which easily reminds one of Yourcenar’s portrayal of ancient Rome, is for Yourcenar one aspect of ancient Japan that did not survive the relentless tide of Westernization in the twentieth century. In this book, homosexuality in Mishima’s Japan appears to be as prohibited and silenced as its postwar militarism. The most surprising aspect of a book on Mishima, written by a lesbian author in the 1980s, is therefore how lightly Yourcenar treads on the well-known subject of Mishima’s homosexuality.

While many studies of Mishima’s semi-autographical Confessions of a Mask have focused on male homosexuality, Yourcenar largely ignores this aspect in her discussion of the novel aside from commenting on Mishima’s anxiety over the subject (18). When examining Mishima’s tetralogy The Sea of Fertility, Yourcenar even claims that Honda’s obsession with his friend Kiyoaki, which extends to the latter’s reincarnations for two generations, is not love (68). Yourcenar’s most interesting omission on the topic of homosexuality concerns Mishima himself: when it comes to Mishima’s infamous suicide, which Yourcenar discusses in great detail, it is inevitable to mention his relationship with the youth who completed the ritual suicide for Mishima, and who eventually joined him in death. Morita Masakatsu, a 25-year-old man who was

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32 It is in fact difficult to find critical discussions about Confessions of a Mask that do not address male homosexuality. Discussions in Japanese about homosexuality in Confessions include but are not limited to: Okuno Takeo, Mishima Yukio Ron [On Mishima Yukio]. Edited by Nihon bungaku kenkyū shiryō kankōkai, Yūseidō, 1971, p. 31-50; Nishimoto Masakatsu, Mishima Yukio: Dandizumu No Bungei Sekai [Mishima Yukio: The Literary World of Dandyism]. Sōbunsha, 1999.
“following Mishima everywhere like a betrothed” (a phrase Yourcenar quotes from an unknown source), was a “companion and perhaps long-sought disciple” instead of a lover (140-41).

Yourcenar’s desexualized word choice here is deliberate: companion (compagnon) and disciple (séide) are her interpretations of Morita’s relationship with Mishima, as opposed to critics and biographers who had “overemphasized the sensual side” (141). She then cryptically revises herself by saying that “it is natural for two beings who have decided to die together, and one at the hands of the other, to want to meet in bed at least once, and this is a notion to which the ancient samurai spirit would not have objected” (142). What is curious about this passage is that there is no room in this scholarly treatise about Mishima for the word “gay,” which appears in the book but once and is cautiously placed between quotation marks.33

This absence of modern homosexuality is not entirely shocking in the context of Yourcenar’s works, which feature homosexuality abundantly but almost exclusively in the past tense, in ancient cultures such as Greece and Rome that Yourcenar considers to be more tolerant than modern times. Yourcenar’s choice to write about a literary figure whose homosexuality is perhaps overshadowed only by his death, both in Japan and internationally, and then deliberately glide over the sexual aspect is perplexing.

33 She mentions the word gay in her discussion of Forbidden Colors: “We are in the ‘gay’ world of post-war Japan” « Nous sommes dans les milieu “gais” du Japon d’après-guerre » (31).
Shibusawa, the Japanese translator of *Mishima*, wonders about Yourcenar’s elision of homosexuality in his afterword to the Japanese edition. He finds it “peculiar” (kii/奇異) that Yourcenar, the author who had created so many homosexual characters since her debut novel, should “largely limit the homosexual perspective in this book, almost never discussing it in a conspicuous way.”³⁴

What’s worth noting is that Shibusawa is not just a translator of this book—he is a celebrated novelist himself as well as a personal friend of Mishima. For someone as close to Mishima and to contemporary Japan as Shibusawa, for whom no Western mediation is needed to access the “bizarreness” of Japanese culture, to wonder why a European author fails to address Mishima’s homosexuality is perhaps enough indication of how much Yourcenar might have overestimated the taboo around homosexuality in mid-twentieth century Japan, and more importantly, Japan’s alterity vis-à-vis the West.

Shibusawa provides his own interpretation of Yourcenar’s silence on homosexuality: he suggests that it is perhaps because Yourcenar considers homosexuality to be a “self-evident psychological tendency” that she does not find the subject worth elaborating upon (180). Despite his positive interpretation, however, Shibusawa is apparently dissatisfied by Yourcenar’s circumlocutions around homosexuality.

³⁴ The original passage follows Shibusawa’s compliments on Yourcenar’s original insights on Mishima, while indicating that Yourcenar’s limited discussion on homosexuality is one of the weaknesses of her book (180).
In a passage that discusses a lesbian scene in Mishima’s *The Temple of Dawn*, Yourcenar describes the two women as “frail beauty” (*beauté frêle*) and “strong beauty” (*beauté forte*) (78). Apparently a reference to Baudelaire’s “Femmes damnées,” Yourcenar’s description does invoke a lesbian allusion, albeit a literary one from mid-nineteenth century. Instead of keeping the Baudelaire allusion, Shibusawa’s translation makes a rather drastic departure: *beauté frêle* is translated as “the feminine role” (*onna yaku*), while *beauté forte* is translated as “the butch role” (*tachi yaku*) (87). While the phrases *tachi yaku* and *onna yaku* originated in traditional kabuki theatre, Shibusawa is most possibly using them in terms of lesbian slangs that roughly correspond to butch/femme in 1960s Japan. By revising Yourcenar’s literary, mid-nineteenth century lesbian reference to a modern, subcultural Japanese one, Shibusawa literalizes and resexualizes Yourcenar’s circumlocutions around homosexuality in the book.

For Shibusawa, Yourcenar is not explicit enough about homosexuality: not in her discussions about Mishima’s life and works, or in homosexuality being part of the connection between Mishima and herself. In his afterword, Shibusawa speculates that what Yourcenar resonates with most in Mishima is perhaps the latter’s “intimacy with death,” whereas “homosexuality, shared by both authors, while can’t be overlooked, is

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but of secondary importance” (177-78). Shibusawa explains what he finds perplexing—that a French lesbian author should write about a contemporary gay Japanese author and downplay the centrality of homosexuality in the latter’s life and works—by attributing it to Yourcenar’s understanding of sexuality.

However, I would suggest to also place the dynamic that Yourcenar establishes between self and otherness, familiarity and exoticism into consideration. For Yourcenar, the exoticism of ancient Japan is distinguished partly by its tolerance of homosexuality, an exoticism not dissimilar to her portrayal of ancient Greece and Rome, and this exoticism can only be constituted by modernity’s repression of it. Yourcenar’s silence around Mishima’s homosexuality can therefore be read as her effort at familiarizing him: by focusing on the less ostensibly male homoerotic moments in Mishima’s life and works, Yourcenar constructs a portrait of an artist who may engage in homosexual acts but who lives in a culture that does not allow him to vocalize them.

Shibusawa’s respectful corrections of Yourcenar’s mistakes are an example of how Japan writes back to the “fan” of Mishima: although Yourcenar commits the usual errors when observing the culture from the outside, it is these very errors that make her appreciation of Japan invaluable. It is Yourcenar’s outsider status, her misreadings verging on the Orientalist, and indeed, her construction of Japan as an object of fantasy incongruent with its perceived reality by authors such as Shibusawa—that makes her a fascinating literary figure in Japan.
If Yourcenar’s fascination with Hadrian and Mishima can be understood as quintessentially fantastical, in the sense that she negotiates her relationship with the self through writing across categories of gender, culture, and temporality, her fantasies did not exist in a vacuum. While her literary love letters to ancient Greece and Rome are a backward gaze that could not be reciprocated, her affection for contemporary Japan had not gone unnoticed by the recipient. Her fame in Japan both before and after her death in 1987 has not just been inspired by her illustrious status in world literature, but also by her very interest in, and often misunderstanding of Japan as a culture drastically different from her own.

She eventually transforms into an object of fantasy herself, with avid fans in Japan and a book of essays dedicated to her in a style reminiscent of her musings on Mishima. The fantasies, although appearing to be mutual, are by no means symmetrical: Japanese readings and rewritings of Yourcenar can be as affectionate and fantastical as her writings on Hadrian and Mishima, but are at times also permeated with colonial sentiments and self-derogation.

**Suga’s Cross-cultural Foot Fetish**

Aside from Mishima himself and Shibusawa, Suga Atsuko (1929-1998) is another Japanese literary figure who had expressed her admiration for Yourcenar. Suga was an essayist, translator, and scholar in Italian literature, whose expatriate experience in Europe for more than a decade finds a kindred spirit in Yourcenar’s self-imposed exile
in the United States. Suga’s last book published during her lifetime was a collection of essays on Yourcenar, titled *Shoes of Yourcenar* [Yurusunāru no kutsu].

First published in 1996, nine years after Yourcenar’s death, Suga recounts her fascination with Yourcenar in a book that is part literary biography, part critical analysis, and part autobiography. While the relaxed mixture of biography of a literary figure and discussion of her works is reminiscent of Yourcenar’s own book on Mishima, Suga’s book departs from Yourcenar’s in how ostensibly personal it is. While Yourcenar’s *Mishima* is just as personal and intimate between the lines, it disguises the author behind the use of collective pronouns and scholarly details. Suga’s *Yourcenar* is much more straightforward: this is a book about how one author relates to another through writing—a fan appropriation.

The seven essays in *Shoes of Yourcenar* were published over two years in *Bungei*, a Japanese literary magazine. The essays weave together Yourcenar’s life and works with Suga’s memories of her childhood in Japan, her experience of studying abroad in France and Italy, and her travels “in the footsteps of Yourcenar“ — to Castel Sant’Angelo and to Yourcenar’s residence on Mount Desert Island. Although a significant portion of the book is informed by Yourcenar’s works, especially *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Suga is candid about other, less literary or scholarly sources of her attraction to the author.

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Suga admits that what drew her to Yourcenar in the first place was the latter’s name. She explains that while “Marguerite” is the name of a flower, when “Yourcenar” is pronounced in Japanese (yurusunaaru), phonetically the name reminds her of the Japanese verbs “to sway/to shake” [yureru/yusuru], which in turn remind her of “trees and flowers” (31). This free association of Yourcenar’s pen name in Japanese is, of course, unrelated to what the name connotes in French, or for the author herself. Yourcenar is an anagram of the author’s family name Crayencour, and Yourcenar mentioned that she was fond of the letter Y, because it is shaped as a “fork in the road or a tree... with arms spread.” The coincidence in the arboreal image is a misreading that happens to get it right, but Suga’s reading of Yourcenar’s name is nevertheless a fantasy that deliberately vacates the context.

This confession of attraction through irrelevant images inspired by the author’s native language is characteristic of Suga’s depiction of Yourcenar throughout the book: 

*Shoes of Yourcenar* is neither biography nor fiction, but an *intentional misreading* of Yourcenar as an exotic figure, a *fanzine* characterized by literary voyeurism and creative appropriations. It is through a definitively Japanese lens—a deliberately distorting one

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57 See Marguerite Yourcenar and Matthieu Galey, *With Open Eyes: Conversations with Matthieu Galey*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Beacon Press, 1984, p. 35. Linda Klieger Stillman also has an interpretation of the French connotations of the name Yourcenar: she suggests that the name is “gynecentric,” and when the Y is removed, what is left is an anagram of “rancœur” — the “bitterness or resentment one retains after a disappointment or an injustice” (263).
at that—that forges a fantastical image of Yourcenar that is located elsewhere, at a different time.

Suga’s idiosyncratic reading of Yourcenar is most prominently featured in the recurrent motif of shoes. The book title *Shoes of Yourcenar* appears to be a tribute to *Memoirs of Hadrian*: the Japanese translation of the latter book is *Hadorianusu-tei no kaisō*, which is in the same grammatical structure as *Yurununāru no kutsu*. But the title is also a literal reference to Suga’s fascination with the shoes that Yourcenar had worn over the years, as seen in photographs of her. The first and final essays in the book both study pictures of Yourcenar and the shoes she was wearing in them. The first essay focuses on a photograph taken when Yourcenar was two years old, and the last one on a photograph taken during the last year of Yourcenar’s life, in 1987.

The attention to shoes and for one woman writer to scrutinize another woman writer’s footwear out of personal interest is, as Tada Chimako in her postscript to the book describes, “slightly erotic.” Furthermore, the two pairs of shoes that Suga focuses on are both evocative of a *shōjo* (young girl) type of girlhood and femininity. The first pair are found in a 1906 photograph of a two-year-old Yourcenar (see fig. 8).

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Figure 8: Marguerite Yourcenar as a child (1906)
Suga comments that Yourcenar in the picture is “like a French Jumeau doll, with porcelain skin and chubby cheeks,” wearing a white lace dress “like heaping petals, as if Dante’s mysterious roses were plucked from Heaven” (21). This fetishized portrayal of a young child with literary and cultural allusions carries a distinct overtone of looking in from the outside: Yourcenar’s porcelain skin doesn’t just resemble a doll’s, but a French doll’s—and the Dante metaphor is appropriate perhaps only to the extent that it is European. This is what a picture of a European child in early twentieth-century clothing signifies to a Japanese spectator—who happens to be an erudite spectator seasoned in European cultures.

Suga’s passage on the 1906 photograph ends with her observation of the child’s shoes: they appear as if they were worn on the wrong feet (25). This observation is framed in contrast with the last essay in the volume, where Suga studies a 1987 photograph of Yourcenar (see fig. 9).
While the two-year-old Yourcenar is described as having limited control over both how her shoes were worn and her own posture (her “expressionless” legs hang like two inanimate poles [24]), for Suga, the 84-year-old Yourcenar radiates agency and independence through her choice of footwear. Suga describes the shoes in this picture as “buttoned on the side, in a style commonly made for small children” (252). Since the style is not often seen in shoes for adults, Suga speculates that the shoes may have been custom-made, which would be the reason why they appear to be expensive, with visibly soft leather, and fit Yourcenar’s feet perfectly (252).

The idea of an 84-year-old woman to have her footwear custom-made in a style reminiscent of schoolgirls is, for Suga, a symbol of freedom and independence. Suga
juxtaposes the two photographs that represent the nascent and final stages of
Yourcenar’s life to construct a bildungsroman of an ideal European girl: born into white
doll shoes that do not fit, and leaves the world in white, custom-made Mary Janes that
are deceptively plain. There is a *shōjo*ness that lies not in the shoes themselves, but in the
way that Suga describes and obsesses over them: the tiny doll shoes with oversized
bows and the schoolgirl shoes both embody an ideal femininity that Suga aspires to but
could never quite achieve.

Suga’s own memories of shoes tell a less ideal narrative: the shoes that she wore
as a child were always oversized and wore out before they finally fit, and the Japanese
sandals (*geta*) were always breaking and bruised her feet, to the point where she
wonders if her feet were “disqualified” for wearing well-fitting shoes (9-12). Her first
experience of wearing well-fitting shoes was at 6, when the missionary school she
attended ordered custom-made Mary Janes for indoor use (12).

But even those Mary Janes—which were exactly like the ones that Yourcenar
wore in her 1987 photograph—did not last. Suga recalls her envy at the shoes that the
school sisters were wearing: narrow, black leather, laced up shoes with a five-inch heel
(13). When describing these shoes, Suga summons a visual feast that could only come
from a foot fetishist:

> I yearned for those shoes that emanated the essence of nobility…. When the
> sisters taught dancing or were explaining a game, they would gently lift up the
> hem of their long habits with one hand. I would see their thin ankles wrapped in
> pitch-black socks, with their shoes perfectly holding their feet. Those shoes
glistened like volcano glass underneath their skirts, and I felt as if I suddenly saw the West. (13-14, emphasis mine)

This passage makes clear that young Suga’s object of desire was not the shoes themselves, not even the fine taste that they represent, but a vague, all-encompassing, West. The phrase that Suga uses, seiyō西洋, is best translated as “the West.” Young Suga’s stolen glimpses underneath the sister’s skirt, while carrying the same forbidden, homoerotic sentiment as Suga’s obsession with Yourcenar’s shoes, embody a desire that is less sexual than racial, or cultural—desire for the seiyō. In this primal scene of the young girl witnessing the hidden truth of Western footwear, the “nobility” (kōkisa高貴) emanates from shoes that fit (a luxury) and are taken good care of (the “glistening”). The sight of those shoes made the young Suga realize that “this is what shoes are supposed to be like” (13)—shoes themselves are a modern Western product.

This is made especially clear when Suga describes that she had to wear geta to school during WWII, since shoes had become a precious commodity. She recalls that the noises her geta made on the terrazzo floor carefully polished by the sisters made her feel “barbarous” [yaban野蛮] (16). One day she realized that one of the sisters was staring at her feet from across the corridor, and that’s when she decided to never wear geta to school again (16-17). This returning gaze of “the West,” which in Suga’s interpretation silently condemned the “barbarian” for not wearing real shoes, appears to be the source of shame for Suga throughout the book. Considering the context of Suga’s education and career, this shame also appears to be the driving force behind her desire to approximate
the West: she graduated from the missionary school after the war with a college degree, studied in France and Italy in her twenties and remained in Europe until her forties, and was later known in Japan for her essays on and translations of Italian literature. Like Yourcenar, Suga had been on a self-imposed exile, both geographically and culturally. Unlike Yourcenar, Suga’s exile was at least partially motivated by her shame at being not “Western” and modern enough: her search of well-fitting shoes is at the same time looking back at her own “disqualified” feet through Western eyes. Seiyō becomes the mirror through which she recognizes her own (inadequate) Japaneseness.

Yourcenar’s desire for ancient Rome is also a crossing over, but in a direction that does not reciprocate Suga’s. While Suga is keen on fitting her feet into European shoes throughout her book, Yourcenar yearns to rid of all footwear. Going back to the postscript for Memoirs of Hadrian, Yourcenar also has a section on the metaphor of shoes and their relationship to the human feet, which serves as an interesting contrast to Suga’s book:

"The human substance and structure hardly change: nothing is more stable than the curve of a heel, the position of a tendon, or the form of a toe. But there are periods when the shoe is less deforming than in others. In the century of which I speak we are still very close to the undisguised freedom of the bare foot." (332)

If the custom-made, well-polished, perfectly fitting shoes embody for Suga a European modernity that Japan in the 1930s was yet to catch up on (and is arguably still the case, according to Suga, in the 1990s), the bare foot for Yourcenar represents an unbridled freedom that is forever lost in the modern world. Shoes for Yourcenar restrain the
human feet, and in worse cases, deform them. Suga, on the other hand, worries if her feet were deformed by the less restraining geta, which rendered her feet too liberated, to the point where she can’t fit into proper shoes anymore. If what Suga desires in the Sister’s laced-up shoes and in Yourcenar’s Mary Janes is a pinnacle of human civilization, what Yourcenar longs for in the bare foot, in writing about Rome in the second century, is a primitive past that can never be retrieved.

Both Yourcenar’s and Suga’s desires are fantasies that idealize an unattainable otherness that is desirable because of its exoticism—its difference from the desiring self. But the otherness in question is also exotic because it is desired. Yourcenar’s primitivism and Suga’s idealization of the West both exoticize, and in turn eroticize, their objects of desire. Their fantasies are not concerned with the context in which their objects of desire are situated (for Yourcenar, Roman slavery and the subjugation of women; for Suga, what Yourcenar’s name signifies in French instead of Japanese)—they focus solely on what forms the distance that can then be crossed. Writing about otherness, in this sense, is an attempt to crossover to the other side, to close the distance between the writing self and the written—a distance that is fabricated by the writing self in the first place. The attempt to approximate otherness is destined to fail, not (only) because the objects of desire are in themselves unfathomable, but because once the crossing is accomplished, the other side reached, and the “transport” into “another’s body and soul” is achieved,
there is no longer any space for fantasy. The point is not only that otherness is unknowable, but that the writing subject resists its knowability.

Because of their fantastical nature, Yourcenar’s books on Hadrian and Mishima, and Suga’s writings on Yourcenar never form a dialogue. What I have laid out so far is not a conversation between East and West, but rather a seriality: the Japanese author auto-orientalizes through her fantasies about the European expatriate author, who fantasizes about the unfettered freedom represented by the Roman emperor Hadrian, who in turn fantasizes about ancient Greece and its glorified past. In her postscript for Suga’s book, Tada Chimako describes precisely such a seriality of desire. As a translator of the Japanese version of Memoirs of Hadrian, Tada adds herself to the seriality by naming her postscript “Shoes of Suga.”

In a style reminiscent of Suga’s, who models her writing after Yourcenar, Tada recalls having met a youth who visited her house twenty years ago (Tada wrote the postscript in 1996). The Japanese youth was a passionate fan of Memoirs of Hadrian and was visiting Tada because she was the translator of the book.\textsuperscript{39} The youth recounts his expeditions to Italy, Greece, Asia Minor, and Egypt according to Tada’s translation of Yourcenar’s account of Hadrian’s life (263). Tada was moved by the young man’s enthusiasm and determination, especially since “unlike today, it wasn’t a time when

\textsuperscript{39} Tada’s translation of Memoirs of Hadrian was first published in Japan in 1963 by Hakusuisha Publishing.
students could travel overseas at will” (264). Tada then draws a parallel between the youth and herself, and then to Suga and Yourcenar: “Yourcenar follows Hadrian; by translating Yourcenar’s book, I also follow the emperor in my imagination; the youth who followed Hadrian with my translation in his pocket; Suga Atsuko follows both Hadrian and Yourcenar” (265). Tada portrays the followings (she uses the verb 追いう, which means chasing after) as parallel lines that neither converge nor converse, but run in directions toward each other without ever reaching their respective destinations. Tada describes the overlapping parallels as a “magnificent fugue” that spans over fifty years, with repetitions on the motif from a two-thousand-year-old historical figure—the emperor Hadrian (265). While Tada’s fugue metaphor focuses on the cross-temporal seriality, what she leaves out is the cultural and gender cadences of these followings.

Suga’s following of Yourcenar is not in a perfect symmetry with Yourcenar’s following of Hadrian. Yourcenar expresses her dismay at a repressive present through idealizing and primitivizing a liberal past in ancient Rome, which also forms the fantasy of a foundation for European, if not Western, modern identity. What she appeals to is a more natural, less artificial “origin” of the culture she is a part of, which explains why she compares the period she writes about to a bare foot: she wishes to take off her modern shoes.

Suga, on the other hand, wishes to put those very shoes on—in future tense, always looking forward to the day when Japan will finally fit into the Western shoes that
she never gets to wear—as if she is located in Yourcenar’s past, even though her book was published nine years after Yourcenar’s death. The racial/cultural crossings on Suga’s part problematizes the parallel between different crossings with power imbalances and Japan’s unique position between European imperialism and its own colonial history. Portraying the serial desires as symmetries underestimates the situatedness and the ensuing problems of each of these fantasies: the music changes with each refrain.

Besides the racial/cultural aspect, one other aspect that Suga’s fan writing on Yourcenar adds to the picture is female homosociality/homoeroticism. While Yourcenar had been criticized for not writing enough about women and over-idealizing men, especially male homosexuality, her Japanese followings and literary recreations appear to have generated a different dimension of her work. Although Suga’s book on Yourcenar is replete with self-orientalism and romanticization of the West, it also produces a textual homosociality between two women authors that has not been seen in Yourcenar’s own works.

Suga’s obsession with shoes, especially with comparing Yourcenar’s shoes with memories of her own, creates an intimate eroticism reminiscent of female friendships. If the titles of Yourcenar and Suga’s books are taken to be paradigmatic of the mode of relationalities they occupy, Memoirs of Hadrian can be said to focus on the transcendental and the metaphysical—Yourcenar attempts to transpose herself into the emperor’s
mind. *Shoes of Yourcenar*, on the other hand, focuses on the material, where Suga yearns to fit into Yourcenar’s shoes. By peeking under Yourcenar’s literal and metaphorical skirt, Suga manages to traverse a different path of fantasy mediated not by men, but by the materiality of femininity.

**Hadrian and Manga, (Re)united**

Since 2008, there has been a renewed interest in Hadrian and Roman culture because of a bestselling manga series titled *Thermae Romae*. Created by Yamazaki Mari, the manga series depicts Lucius, a fictional Roman architect who time-travels to modern Japan and brings Japanese bath culture back to the Roman public bathhouses that he builds. The series met with international popularity especially after the release of two live-action movie adaptations in 2012 and 2014. What’s interesting about the series, other than its complex and often problematic racial castings (Romans are played by both Western and Japanese actors, who all speak Japanese in the movie), is its portrayal of Hadrian and his homosexuality.

The story is set during Hadrian’s rule, after the death of Antinous, and although Hadrian is not the main character, his presence is felt throughout the series. Hadrian is first introduced through hearsay: the architect Lucius chats with his sculptor friend

41 Lucius Modestus, the architect, is a fictional character and is not to be confused with Lucius Aelius, Hadrian’s adopted son and designated heir, who also appears in the manga.
Marcus about the urgent order to produce statues of Antinous (see fig. 10).

Figure 10: Thermae Romae, vol. 1, p.76
Figure 11: Thermae Romae, vol. 2, p.87
The sculptor in the top left panel complains that he can’t take a break “thanks to this guy [Antinous] drowning in the Nile,” to which Lucius replies that it’s because “emperor Hadrian wants to place his beloved Antinous all over the empire.” In the two lower left panels, the sculptor is shown tapping the naked buttocks of one of the statues of Antinous, saying, “He is pretty for a man, and he does have a nice ass, so I get why the emperor is into him…. But I lose my hard-on when I see what’s in front.”

Although Japanese manga has been no stranger to graphic representations, it nevertheless rigorously sticks to genre conventions and reader expectations. Mundane conversations about male homosexuality and the desirability of male backsides are rarely seen outside of the Boys’ Love genre (to which this series does not belong). While the initial niche target audience of *Thermae Romae* could explain its artistic license, the manga could also be making a playful reference to Boys’ Love, which is obsessed with “what’s in front.” If Hadrian and Antinous belong to the realm of Boys’ Love, Lucius and his sculptor friend can remain as the audience to their romance.

The series addresses Hadrian’s homosexuality on several other occasions, mostly when Lucius is summoned by Hadrian and bystanders assume that he has become the emperor’s new lover. Antinous himself makes a brief appearance in Hadrian’s memory,

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42 The manga magazine where *Thermae Romae* was serialized is *Monthly Comic Beam* [comikku bīmu], which also houses relatively eccentric titles such as *Yaji and Kita: The Midnight Pilgrims* [mayonaka no yajisan kitasan] (Shiriagari Kotobuki, 1994-1997) and *Wandering Son* [hōrō musuko] (Shimura Takako, 2002-2013)—both series feature sexual and gender minorities. The non-mainstream taste that the magazine represents could contribute to the lack of dominating genre for a manga like *Thermae Romae*.
when the latter wonders if he will be reunited with his young lover after his death (see fig. 11).

Antinous is shown in the lower right panel as a spirited youth (the shape of his speech bubbles implies excitement of the speaker). In this series, as in Yourcenar’s *Memoirs*, homosexuality is depicted as part of everyday life, material for friendly banters. The banality of homosexuality is precisely how both Yourcenar and Yamazaki construct the past as an alterity. In this sense, homosexuality is a distancing device that label the authors’ representations of ancient Rome as an exotic time and place. The space of ancient Rome in both Yourcenar and Yamazaki’s texts is a fantasy space.

Yamazaki in fact borrows from Yourcenar’s *Memoirs* in her depictions of Hadrian and Antinous: Yamazaki mentions *Memoirs* once in her comments after each chapter, where she explains how her depiction of Lucius Aelius differs from Yourcenar’s (vol. 4, p. 32). In a 2017 article, Yamazaki also says that she based her portrayal of Hadrian on Yourcenar’s book. She explains that she was moved by how “Yourcenar, the twentieth-century woman, is able to transcend time and gender to empathize with the homosexual emperor in ancient Rome.”

And transcending time is what Yamazaki’s main character in *Thermae Romae* literally does: Lucius Modestus travels from the second century to the year 2009 in every

44 Ibid.
chapter, leaving him confounded by everything he sees, from the existence of plastic to automobiles. Aside from time, however, he is also a traveler to a foreign culture. What the fictional Roman is amazed by is not just modernity, but modern Japan in its most mundane details: the music-playing, water-spraying high-tech toilet, the rubber shower cap to prevent shampoo from entering the eyes. What the series accomplishes (and where its popularity partly lies) is reconstructing the Japanese ego as a modern civilization through bypassing Western modernity altogether.

A more conventional time-traveling narrative might have the ancient Roman wake up in modern Italy (or other nation states that were once part of the Roman Empire) and witness civilization as it had developed in a linear, Western genealogy. Instead, Lucius Modestus travels through bodies of water (mostly onsen) that transport him to an East-Asian bath culture comparable to that of the Romans’. Fantasies of Greco-Roman homoeroticism also bypasses the entire Euro-American history of persecution and gay rights movements and finds a modern-day counterpart in Japanese manga.

If BL sensibilities travel, it travels across temporal and spatial constraints, because it finds the alternative route of flight: through disidentification, cross-identification, and misreading, to read and write like a BL fan is to generate serial relationalities of desire and identification with otherness, not to consolidate a coherent, empowering sense of self.
Conclusion: Call Me by a Name That is Not Mine

By the end of 2017, there were talks in BL fan communities about a new movie that is a must-see for fujoshi. The movie has everything that BL fans love: a beautiful adolescent boy, a slightly older, stockier youth, a villa that comes out of a fairytale, and the absence of a social-political backdrop other than the Casio watch that the boy wears. The movie is Call Me by Your Name, a film that made news for its sweeping accolades during the 2017-2018 award season and became the latest gay-themed movie nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards.

*Call Me by Your Name* is a nostalgic romance about a teenage boy falling in love with an adult man in an idyllic Italian villa around 1983. The movie revolves around Elio, a precocious, polyglot 17-year-old, and his exploration of desire with his father’s 24-year-old summer intern, the erudite and worldly Oliver. *Call Me* is ostensibly a gay movie, but there is something peculiar about the film. Its popularity in BL subcultures is perhaps only preceded by *Brokeback Mountain*, the 2005 film directed by Ang Lee and based on a short story by Annie Proulx. A search for fan fiction based on *Call Me by Your Name* on Archive of Our Own yields around 300 results, which include both stories based on the two characters and those based on the actors.¹

¹ To put the numbers in perspective, *Brokeback Mountain* has 539 stories listed in the archive. *Moonlight*, a 2016 gay-themed movie that also swept the year’s award season, has 66 stories. *Sherlock* (BBC-produced TV show since 2010) has 102,491. See Archive of Our Own website at: [https://archiveofourown.org/](https://archiveofourown.org/). All searches performed on March 15, 2018.
In one of the stories based on the actors, the synopsis reads, “Timothée can’t seem to control himself when Armie’s around, but perhaps he doesn’t need to.” Fans are fascinated not only by the love story within the movie, but also by the off-screen “chemistry” between the two reportedly straight actors. Indeed, the movie appears to be more than happy to capitalize on this fandom. During the promotion tour, the two actors, Timothée Chalamet and Armie Hammer repeatedly told the story about their first and only rehearsal: director Luca Guadagnino asked the two actors to rehearse a scene, Chalamet and Hammer got down on the ground and started making out, and they kept at it until they suddenly realized that Guadagnino had walked away, leaving them “rolling around in the grass,” alone.3

If Call Me by Your Name contains a fictional relationship between a youth and a boy, the movie has produced a separate relationship between the real-life actors. Both relationships, fictional and promotional, are homoerotic. And both involve prohibitions: the fictional one because the boy is underage and the youth is a family friend (and the story is set in 1983, although the movie arguably fails to reflect this), and the promotional one because both actors claim to be straight. On and off screen, the movie

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2 See https://archiveofourown.org/works/13976181/chapters/32177559.
3 Chalamet and Hammer told this story on numerous occasions, including on The Ellen Show (aired November 29th, 2017) and the press conference at BFI London Film Festival (October 9th, 2017). Video for the Ellen segment can be found at https://youtu.be/F0rXPrnC_Ps and the press conference at https://youtu.be/iFhRqNhWCqg.
fits perfectly into the BL desire to bridge the gap between the homosocial and the homosexual, and to derive pleasure from the process.

This two-fold pleasure that Call Me provides, however, is also why gay critics have been ambivalent, if not outright hostile toward the film. A writer for the Advocate magazine says that the film is “gorgeous,” but criticizes it for not being gay enough.4 Slate calls it “a gay masterpiece that is absolutely not gay.”5 D. A. Miller’s article, “Elio’s Education,” describes the movie as “repulsive” and “more than exasperating.”6 A review article by Benjamin Goggin points out that the problem with this movie is precisely its flirtation with off-screen homoeroticism:

[T]he straight actors of Call Me by Your Name have stoked mania and gained attention by queerbaiting gay and straight fans with nods to a playful and ambiguous real-life relationship—encouraging the internet’s unhealthy recent tendency to project queer erotic and romantic energy onto straight men, through “shipping” fandoms, perpetuating the straight fame cycle that pushes down gay actors.

This passage names BL fans (“shipping fandoms” as the author calls them) as the target audience of the homoeroticism between actors—and the author is right. What is problematic about this obsession with playful homoeroticism, according to the author, is that it is “unhealthy,” “queerbaiting,” and eventually it hurts real gay culture. This is the

reason why *Call Me* has been unpopular with gay media and critics: it caters to non-gay audience by exploiting gayness.

The question remains: how does one know that the target audience of a text is not gay? Many reviews point to casting straight actors and a lack of sex scenes. One of the most convincing arguments, however, is about how the movie constructs a fantasy, rather than a realistic portrayal of gay life in the 1980s. The movie’s setting in an isolated location and its lack of reference to contemporary sexual politics has led critics to describe it as a “dream sequence” and a “fairy tale,” both referring to the movie’s distance from reality. D. A. Miller’s article uses the word “fantasy” several times to describe the film, citing the camera’s evasion of “the negative in sex” a main factor that contributes to the film’s repulsive unreality.

Miller’s complaint is that *Call Me by Your Name* reads more like a fantasy than a gay movie, which should include a serious confrontation with the reality of gay sex and gay politics. Miller also places the movie in a genealogy of “MGM,” abbreviated for “mainstream gay movies,” which include *Maurice* (1987), *Moonlight* (2016), and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). The fact that Miller places *Brokeback Mountain*, another BL fan favorite,  

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7 For example, Miz Cracker’s *Slate* article, cited above, mentions both reasons.
alongside *Call Me* is not a coincidence. The cause for his (and other critics’) exasperation at movies such as *Call Me* and *Brokeback Mountain* is the same one that appeals to BL fans: the fantasy of male homosexuality.

While *Brokeback Mountain* is based on a short story written by a woman, *Call Me* is based on a novel by André Aciman, a heterosexual man. Critics have taken issue with the sexuality of Aciman, suggesting that the movie’s unrealistic representation of gayness should be attributed to Aciman’s lack of real-life gay experience.¹⁰ This is also part of Miller’s argument about *Brokeback Mountain*: in his 2007 article on the movie, Miller criticizes that the real story beneath *Brokeback’s* gay façade is a “woman’s complex desiring relation to male homosexuality,” which renders the gay narrative an “objectifying” one.¹¹

It is problematic to determine the sexuality of a text based on the author’s sexuality, rumored or self-professed. I would argue that Aciman’s authorial position is indeed non-gay, however, regardless of his sexual orientation. In his 2018 interview with *The Advocate*, Aciman recalls that at the beginning, the main characters in his novel were a heterosexual couple.¹² That changed immediately, he explains, because he “wanted

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¹⁰ One example is *Out Magazine’s* review of the movie, which is favorable toward it but complains that certain unrealistic details are “distracting.” See Bret Easton Ellis, “Movie of the Year: Bret Easton Ellis on the Many Pleasures of *Call Me by Your Name*.” *Out Magazine*, Dec. 2017, https://www.out.com/out-exclusives/2017/12/18/movie-year-bret-easton-ellis-many-pleasures-call-me-your-name.


there to be an inhibition of some sort,” and heterosexual relationships are not subjected to the same level of inhibition as homosexual ones. This logic of choosing to write about homosexuality because it entails more struggling before a relationship can be consummated is exactly how Henry Jenkins theorizes slash fandom. In chapter one, I discussed how Jenkins expands Eve Sedgwick’s erotic triangle to explain slash fans’ desire for male homoeroticism. The pleasure of “shipping,” he postulates, lies in overcoming the gap between homosociality and homosexuality, and the higher the hurdle, the more pleasure it generates. The reason that Aciman gives for switching the gender of his characters is commensurate with BL’s mechanism of desire.

In the interview, when asked about what he thinks of critics who disapprove of straight authors writing gay stories, Aciman’s response is, in this case, Yourcenarian:

If you are unable to step out of your little self to explore what somebody else is, then you shouldn’t be doing anything. All you need is some talent and some imagination to just do this thing which Keats used to call the “negative capability,” which is the ability to get out of yourself. That’s what sympathy is all about.

This is almost a paraphrase of Yourcenar’s idea of “sympathetic magic.” Aciman’s desire to “explore what somebody else is” and to get out of oneself is what Yourcenar hopes to achieve in Memoirs of Hadrian: to approximate otherness, to transport herself into a different positionality, and to “keep one’s shadow out of the picture” (Memoirs 331). The urge to disidentify is concurrent with the one to cross-identify, and in this process, identitarian categories are suspended and persistently renegotiated.
Unsurprisingly, *Call Me* includes many Greco-Roman references. The movie’s opening credits display a series of images of Greco-Roman statues, all naked torsos of young men. Hadrian’s name is mentioned in a scene where the two main characters, Elio and Oliver, accompany Elio’s father on his archaeological discovery at the beach. They pull out a bronze statue from the water, which Elio’s father explains to be one of a pair, and that the Emperor Hadrian also had a copy. The Greco-Roman statues can only be read as an implicit reference to Greek love, and the father’s enthusiasm for them corresponds to the revelation of his homosexuality at the end of the film. The movie’s temporality of desire is therefore serial: made in 2017, the story looks back to the early 1980s, and the characters again look back to ancient Greece and Rome. Its homoeroticism is established upon the departure from the here and now and the exchange of fantasies about an elsewhere.

*Call Me by Your Name* may have two straight actors, a gay director, a gay screenwriter, and a straight author. The movie’s mode of desire, however, is closer to BL fantasy than to either gay or straight. Its evacuation of reality, its serial departure for the exotic, its bridging of homosociality and homosexuality both on and off screen all dovetail with BL mechanisms of desire. It is again, therefore, not surprising that the book’s Japanese translation, to be published in April 2018, has a cover design like a BL manga/novel (see fig. 12). 
Figure 12: Cover design of the Japanese translation of Call Me by Your Name
This translation will be published by Oakla, a publisher that is known for novels that are adapted into movies and BL works. And the cover art does not just resemble BL manga, it is in fact created by a famous BL manga artist, Kotobuki Tarako, who is the author of the long-running BL manga series *Sex Pistols* (2004-2016, 9 vols). With the backdrop and the characters apparently modeled after the movie, the cover art also embodies a distinctly BL aesthetics, with slender, lengthy limbs and pensive facial expressions.

*Call Me by Your Name* as a novel and a movie may not have been created specifically with the BL market in mind. Both texts however, especially when viewed together, find kinship in the BL aesthetics and mechanisms of desire that I discussed in this dissertation. The backlash against the film, targeting its fantastical quality and inadequate gayness, is a rare site of direct confrontation between BL and identity politics. In the example of this film, the confrontation has not been a cordial one. Shame is imposed upon BL for its “unhealthy” desire: not only is it the wrong way to desire, it also hurts those who do it the right way.

By analyzing the discussions around *Call Me* in this coda, I rehearse my main arguments about BL fantasy throughout this dissertation, while also contemplating the site of encounter between fantasy and identity politics. Fantasy is the ultimate otherness to identity politics—it is easier for identitarian thought to imagine an antagonistic identity than to understand a position that is passionate about departing from itself. A
similar case could perhaps be made about the relationality between identity politics and queer critique. But identity politics and queerness share a united front—a common identity, if you will—on their definition of what counts as political and worthwhile.

If identity politics, queerness, and BL constitute an erotic triangle, it makes one wonder what positions they will take. What this dissertation desires, with an appropriate amount of shame, is to exchange with my readers not one particular positionality, but the *relationalities* between them.
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Biography

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