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# Toward a Queer and Trans Econarratology: Space and Place in Shola von Reinhold's *LOTE*

**Abstract:** This essay brings together queer, ecocritical, and narratological reading strategies to interpret the persistent spatial ambiguity and complicated intertextual narrative form of Shola von Reinhold's *LOTE* (2020) as essential to its representation of a Black trans femme experience. Our interpretation of the novel bucks the critical trend of reading the "authentic" or realistic content of trans narratives and instead privileges its various narrative resources and the ways in which they encourage readers to model and imaginatively inhabit the protagonist's Black trans femme experience. This reading not only helps position LOTE as a *trans*narrative, but also builds out a specifically trans narratology—and, by extension, a richer understanding of trans fiction—and contributes to the urgent project of diversifying environmental imaginations and experiences, especially those of marginalized communities.

**Keywords:** Shola Von Reinhold, *LOTE*, econarratology, trans narratology, transgender fiction, trans fiction, queer space, Bright Young Things

The opening lines of Shola von Reinhold's *LOTE* (2020) make clear that the novel's protagonist-narrator, Mathilda Adamarola, has a complicated relationship to space. The novel begins in what seems to be recent-day London as Mathilda—a Black, working-class femme obsessed with the 1920s Bohemian "Bright Young Things" set—makes her way into the national photography archives where she is set to volunteer. "'Excuse me, miss! Where do you think you're going?'" asks an "incensed blond twink" who has appointed himself security guard (von Reinhold 2020, 5). He continues: "'This is a members-only club.'" The 'twink's' reaction immediately establishes the quotidian surveillance and microaggressions under which Mathilda subsists. But it also foregrounds a key issue in the novel: *where* is Mathilda? And where does she belong?

The novel's action centers on Mathilda's quest to learn more about a mysterious figure named Hermia Druitt, after she discovers an archival photograph of this (fictional) Black poet and painter posing with Stephen Napier Tennant, one of the (real-life) Bright Young Things. This Black figure's absence from the diegetic historical record thus echoes

Mathilda's quite literal difficulty in entering the archives as a Black person. Mathilda's obsession with Hermia is inspired by her dogged pursuit of a state of "Transfixion": a "humming […] not dissimilar to holy rapture" (19) that begins around the age of fourteen, in which she experiences the "feeling of not only recognising, but of having been recognised" (20) by flamboyant, predominantly queer aesthetes from the past—ranging from the aforementioned Tennant to King Ludwig II of Bavaria to Josephine Baker. Mathilda initially believes that these moments signal some form of reincarnation, but ultimately comes to understand them via another "gleaming narrative," in which she "belonged to some divine clan of being, a sort of celestial siblinghood to whom [she] was irrevocably connected" (22). Strikingly, in a book laced with questions about the suitability of Mathilda's presences in certain spaces, it is in these moments that Mathilda feels at "home" with her "kinsfolk," as if placed in a "network of silver cords" (22).

Indeed, perhaps informed by the feelings of *not* belonging that the 'twink's' questioning fosters, Mathilda's narration of her physical surroundings tends to be slight on spatializing cues. She sparsely or confusingly narrates spaces such as restaurants, meeting rooms, and city streets. And her descriptions of environmental features are often non-realist, refusing the kind of information that typically allows readers to mentally "be there"—such as when she states that "the concrete ground was […] composed of something like baked and compacted moonlight" (65). We understand Mathilda's narration of the spaces that she inhabits as largely unfixed, and her inhabitation of them as largely untethered, as central to her experience as someone who does not belong in the way that other characters in the novel do. Yet this lack of belonging is not (just) a source of injury for Mathilda; it is also central to her own sense of power. She fears "being stuck in a place" where she has "no power or language to describe [her] powerlessness" and "inability to Escape more generally" (183). Connecting with her "Transfixions" (as she calls the "kinsfolk" or obsessions themselves) is enabled by what she calls her "Escapes" (42): abrupt changes in name, residence, and social circle that speak to her desire to be mobile in many senses of the word. To be stuck, for Mathilda, is to be trapped in a set of values, attitudes, and behaviors that do not accommodate her. To escape—to be continually capable of "Escape"—is thus a source of liberation, strength, and joy. We understand the most important environments in *LOTE*, then, as imaginative, aesthetic, and affective, as opposed to realist, present, and physical; Mathilda is not "fixed" in the here and now, but "*trans*fixed" by the then and there.

In this essay, we combine our expertise as ecocritical and narratological scholars to read *LOTE*'s persistent spatial ambiguity as essential to its representation of Black femme experience and, more specifically (as we will explain further below), Black *trans* femme experience. This econarratological focus is important, we think, given recent scholarly habits of queer theory and criticism of trans fictions. To begin with, much has been written about *time*, and particularly the subversion of normative temporal regimes, in queer and trans representations. Indeed, "queer time" has become its own robust subfield of study in the Western academy, thanks to scholars such as Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz. More recently, scholar Grace Lavery has declared that "[t]rans narratology teaches us that neither a singular narrative of becoming, nor the laying out of life as a causal sequence, will do justice to the complexity of trans identification. Trans lives slip and slide, forward and backward in time" (2019, n.p.). But very little theorizing exists around representations of *space* in queer and trans representations, aside from the more literal approaches to ecological/environmental issues that we see in queer and trans ecologies scholarship. Here, we read a similar 'slipperiness' to the spaces that Mathilda inhabits and argue that her sliding forward and backward through ambiguous spaces is one of the key factors that gives readers of *LOTE* the task of engaging with her trans experience.

Our reading of the novel thus bucks the critical trend of reading the 'authentic' or realistic content of trans narratives. Instead, the various narrative resources of *LOTE*, and the ways in which they encourage readers to develop a new way of reading, modeling, and imaginatively inhabiting a Black trans femme experience, foster interpretations that privilege the novel's form. To phrase this differently, we understand von Reinhold's novel not as foregrounding trans identity, or even describing, literally, a trans life, but demanding that readers engage mentally and emotionally with *what it might be like* to experience the world as a Black trans femme person. We root this reading in the text's aesthetics—most notably, its questioning of belonging via its spatialization and its complicated intertextual/intradiegetic narrative form.

We see several distinct benefits to our approach. First, and most basically, it enables us to read *LOTE as a trans narrative*. Indeed, we would go so far as to say that reading the novel's content does little to reveal its trans resonances. Mathilda never states her gender identity outright in the text and, as we explain further below, the novel does not follow many of the conventions of 'trans lit.' Probably like most readers, we came to the novel with some awareness of its trans resonance, thanks to Duke University Press's

inclusion of ‘trans studies’ as a subject keyword on its Website listing for the novel (Duke 2022), recommendations from prominent trans writers and scholars, and interviews with the author.[i] But when we entered the storyworld, we didn’t see any obvious references to trans experiences. (Here, we should note that we both identify as cisgender, which may or may not explain this situation!) It was only after detailed discussions of the novel’s tricky form that we began to appreciate its unique evocation of trans experience.

Second, our reading of the text helps to build out a specifically trans narratology and, by extension, a richer understanding of trans fiction. Shockingly, as of July 2023, the phrase ‘trans fiction’ garners zero results in the MLA International Bibliography and ‘transgender fiction’ only two results. In one of the latter, author Evelyn Millard asks, fittingly, “where are all the literary critiques on works by trans women? Works by trans women exist, don’t they? They have to exist. Where are they? Who writes about them? Where is the scholarship about them?” (2018, 93). And despite Grace Lavery’s reference to ‘trans narratology’ above, this subfield hardly yet exists. As Chiara Pellegrini states, “[d]espite gender having become increasingly central to narrative studies in the last three decades [thanks in large part to feminist narratologists], an explicit consideration of genders that are other than binary or fixed is persistently absent in this field” (2024, 18-19).[ii]

The general absence of scholarship on trans fiction is particularly perplexing given the recent explosion in publishing by trans-identified authors, and particularly troubling given the anti-trans legal and social backlash that has recently taken place, particularly in the UK and US.[iii] When trans narratives *do* garner attention, commentators tend to engage in the well-worn trend of focusing on content over form. As cultural critic Eli Cugini sums up, “[w]hen books by trans people get reviewed [in the media], we hear a lot about their ‘originality,’ ‘importance’ and ‘bravery,’ and far less about their […] craft” (2021, n.p.). We might also note here narratologist Susan Lanser’s 2021 observation that “queer narratology” more broadly “remains underdeveloped” (12), as well as fellow narratologist Joonas Säntti’s 2022 claim that “queer literary studies in general would benefit from a sustained focus on […] formal and aesthetic means” (34). If these things are true, then they are even more true when it comes to trans narratology and trans literary studies more specifically.

Third, our reading of *LOTE* contributes to the crucial and urgent project of diversifying environmental imaginations and experiences, especially those of marginalized communities. In her initial definition of econarratology, Erin argued that this mode of

reading that “pair[s] ecocriticism’s interest in the relationship between literature and the physical environment with narratology’s focus on the literary structures and devices by which writers compose those narratives” can be an especially suitable methodology for illuminating “locally informed and highly subjective experience of a particular space and time” (James 2015, xiv, xv). She also argued that “engagement with storyworlds stands to foster real-world understanding among readers by opening up channels of communication concerning different environmental experiences across space, time, and culture” (ibid., xv). Here we pair Erin’s methodology with Nicole’s queer-ecological interest in texts that might not overtly seem to be ‘environmental’—that are not primarily concerned with wilderness, or ‘capital-N’ nature. At its most ambitious, our essay foregrounds the narrative resources of trans stories, especially fictional ones, and highlights how authors such as von Reinhold construct the storyworlds of trans characters and/or narrators in which readers must immerse themselves as they interpret the text.

### *LOTE* and Trans Lit

Given the extratextual cues discussed above, and given that Mathilda’s “Transfixions” could be read as a play on *trans fictions*,[iv] we might locate *LOTE* within what some have referred to as the “trans literary revolution” (Plett 2022, n.p.) in the Anglophone world. This revolution was arguably kicked off by the 2010 publication of Imogen Binnie’s *Nevada* by Topside, a now-defunct small US press. As scholar Stephanie Burt explains, “‘Nevada’ seemed to be the first book-length realist novel about trans *women*, in American English, with an ISBN on it”—a nod to the nonetheless crucial writings by trans folks that have circulated online, in zines, and in self-published formats[v]—“that was […] written by one of us” (2022, n.p.). A few milestones have been achieved since then: Torrey Peters became the first trans woman to be longlisted for the Women’s Prize for Fiction for her prominent 2021 novel *Detransition, Baby*; trans writers such as Akwaeke Emezi, Jordy Rosenberg, and Aiden Thomas have published acclaimed and best-selling novels;[vi] and *Nevada* was republished by the mainstream imprint Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in 2022. *LOTE* is similarly decorated, having won the Republic of Consciousness Prize and the James Tait Black Prize for Fiction, and receiving republication by Duke University Press in 2022 after a debut run with Scotland’s Jacaranda Books in 2020. And at least one scholar has deemed it “central to […] the field of contemporary literature today” (Richards 2022, n.p.).

As works of literary fiction, *LOTE* and the aforementioned novels are notable given that trans literature has recently been dominated by nonfiction memoir—and, in decades earlier, by pathologizing or sensationalist case studies and biographies from cis writers. Cugini notes that, "[w]hile memoir has provided a counterpoint to inaccurate and hostile narratives about transness—such as the idea that transness is driven by a sexual fetish, or that trans people can't live happy lives—they've also reproduced harmful or restrictive stories about transness," including binarist and essentialist perspectives (2021, n.p.). Scholar Atalia Israeli-Nevo agrees, observing that the conventional narrative around transgender bodies and transition has characteristics of an "extreme makeover" story line that portrays an "over-the-top, incredible and almost impossible transformation from one sex/gender to the other" (2017, 36). These arguments highlight that, from a narratological standpoint, trans memoirs have tended toward the formulaic, what with their climactic focus on epiphany (Marchinkoski 2023, n.p.), coming out, and/or the gender transition—suggesting that the single most interesting thing about a trans person is their trans-ness. Likewise, many of these works are structured as quest narratives, centering around the quest to transition or find one's self and community, as we see in examples like Jan Morris' 1974 memoir *Conundrum* and Leslie Feinberg's 1993 autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (see Love 2011, 153, 156).

Of course, we must recognize the structural forces behind such trends and not simply engage in what Trish Salah calls the "habitual condemnation" of "trans genre literary writing" (2021, 177). To begin with, as scholar Jay Prosser pointed out in his important 1998 study *Second Skins*, "every transsexual, as a transsexual, is originally an autobiographer. […] The autobiographical act for the transsexual begins even before the published autobiography—namely, in the clinician's office where to be diagnosed [and subsequently treated] as transsexual, s/he must recount a transsexual autobiography" (1998, 101). Or as Pellegrini summarizes, "Trans subjects are narrators: they are placed, more than is the case for cis people, in a position in which they have to continually produce an account of themselves that follows certain patterns of intelligibility, be it to obtain legitimation, satisfy curiosity or combat erasure" (2024, 2). Similarly, rather than laying such generic-formal cliches at the feet of trans authors themselves, author and musician Vivek Shraya traces them back to a conservative publishing industry, observing that "'[t]hey don't know how to receive work that's not dealing with our trauma or our gender'" (as quoted in Cugini 2021, n.p.).

*LOTE* is not about trauma or gender. We have already noted that Mathilda never self-identifies as trans. Von Reinhold's novel also avoids the narrative tropes described

above and, as Burt writes elsewhere of *Nevada*, it "strenuously resists the stance [of] 'Trans 101,'" (2022, n.p.) or didactic pandering to cis readers. Indeed, the only times when *LOTE* signals a trans reading in its content is via implicit, blink-and-you-miss-them cues. For example, in a brief biographical note, the novel redacts the name given to Mathilda at birth—thereby potentially gesturing toward the trans experience of a 'dead name' that does not align with one's gender identity—and lists several other names by which she has been known across her so-called 'Escapes.' Reviewer Lucinda Janson, who notes that Mathilda's friend Erskine-Lily adopts they/them pronouns after finding that he/him pronouns have become "unbearable," also notes that Hermia could be read as trans: "One source [in the novel] mentions an Alexander Wylie born in Scotland around the same time as Hermia's putative birthdate, who attended the same Paris art school. The possibility that this was in fact Hermia is so faint that the casual reader might miss it completely—a demonstration in real time of the slippages and elisions of gender [and, we would add, of race] in the archive" (2021, 17). Again, while *LOTE* could be counted as part of the 'trans literary revolution' corpus, and within the category of trans literature more broadly, it distinguishes itself through oblique and unexpected engagements with the very category of trans.

### *LOTE* and Space

Scholars have argued that histories of anti-obscenity, homophobia, and transphobia have prompted an intensified focus on form and other aesthetics in queer/trans-generated representations. David Getsy declares that, "[h]istorically […] formal manipulation has been the only vehicle through which queer insubordination could be conveyed. Its proponents escaped censure by means of this […] coding through forms, and they mobilized formal traits […] as metonymies of unauthorized desires and positions of queer resistance. In effect, they relied on *how* something was said or imaged rather than the purported *what*" (2017, 255; original emphasis). But more than this, an (over)reliance on aesthetics often constitutes a form of queer joy: "[t]here is something maximalistically fabulous and freeing in the layering upon layering in queer aesthetic productions, and in the luscious ways [queerness] embarrasses the forms that attempt to contain it" (Gutiérrez 2017, 269).[vii] The turn towards aesthetics has special relevance for queer artists of color who, like Mathilda, are underrepresented in archives. Kadji Amin, Amber Musser, and Roy Pérez observe that artists of color are "often assigned the role of […] producing art that transmits information rather than pushing aesthetic boundaries," and that "[s]uch a colonial tasking undermines or even silences

analysis of their aesthetic aims." They continue to argue that "[a]esthetic innovation and formal manipulation are, however, the very substance of many of these artists' engagement with legacies of social violence" (2017, 227). Indeed, in *LOTE*'s account, Black people have often been barred from the aesthetic realm through various means, from literal exclusion from White-dominated artistic academies to more subtle social sanctioning. But Mathilda refuses to acquiesce to the status quo; as her best friend Malachi rationalizes, "'Maybe we should not want it [the aesthetic, beauty, ornamentation] because they have weaponised it, but it was not theirs in the first place'" (von Reinhold 2020, 162).

Whether von Reinhold intends it as a means of encoding Mathilda's queerness/transness or not, *LOTE* is a novel deeply engaged with aesthetics. This is true on many levels: in terms of Mathilda's personal obsessions (poets, dancers, painters, etc.), in terms of the novel's own gorgeous language (uncommon word choices such as "aquarist" [75] and "deliquescent" [102] and "effloresced" [136] appear throughout), and in terms of the complicated resources of spatialization and narration that demand recognition of the narrative *as a work of art*—as opposed to reportage or "trans[missal of] information" (Amin et al. 2017, 227). In other words, the novel makes it impossible to ignore the categories of aesthetic craft and form. And as Mathilda's "Transfixions" suggest, aesthetics, joy, and space—or a sense of "belonging" and feeling at "home"—are deeply intertwined. Yet her experience of aesthetics, joy, and space is markedly different from the trauma and isolation that many scholars and critics have associated with trans narratives.

As the archive 'twink's' microaggression illustrates, Mathilda does not always feel like she belongs in the spaces she moves through. We understand this discomfort as registering in the sparse and disorienting settings that run throughout her narration. Take, for example, a scene that occurs after Mathilda joins an artists' residency in a European town called Dun, having learned that Hermia once lived there. Mathilda narrates an outing with her frenemy Griselda—like most of the residents, a devotee to the anti-aesthetic "Thought Artist" John Garreaux (123)—as follows:

> We passed through an alley and up some small steps into a small courtyard where there was [a] tiny café, with only sitting space on the outside. It was presided over by a woman with red hair who watched a small television that glowed from the back. It looked like the lottery. Griselda ordered two drinks and the woman apparently ignored us, but once we had sat down the last number

> was announced, and she let out a scream of anger before calling to Griselda to ask what we had ordered.
>
> *What the fuck was I doing here?*—Had she actually asked me that? (117; original emphasis)

Griselda's apparent query, which seems to cast skepticism on our heroine's qualifications and commitment, recalls a question that the residency's coordinator had asked her a few pages earlier: "Do you want to be *here*, Mathilda?" (104; original emphasis). Once again, gatekeepers question Mathilda's presence in the rarified, wealthy, and White-dominated spaces of the art world.

This emphasis on location—on what it means to be *here*, or to go *there*—is especially intriguing given how little time the novel spends on detailing physical locations. We never, for instance, learn where in Europe Dun is located, what language its residents speak (Mathilda simply refers to the latter as "the language"), nor even what the town is called in that language (111). And the café that she visits with Griselda is again a case in point. In the passage above, we have no information about where Mathilda is oriented in space once the pair reaches the courtyard. Did she enter the bar with Griselda to order, or did she remain outside? And did Griselda herself enter, or did she just shout from outside? How does the "we" break down? The pronouns of Mathilda's narration muddle matters further. "It" refers to both the restaurant and the lottery on the television, and the distinction between the two is not immediately clear. Nor can we tell initially if the "she" who lets out a scream is Griselda or the barkeeper; ditto the "she" who "ask[ed]" the question. Passages such as these encourage readers to not only take into account how other characters question Mathilda's presence in certain spaces, but to also approach the question much more literally. What is Mathilda *doing* here? What/where even is *here*? How are readers supposed to understand her basic movements in and through the space of the storyworld, given the paucity of details—or, in other moments, confusion of details—with which she narrates her experience?

Yet, as we have suggested, disorientation and disconnection from the physical environment does not solely appear to be a source of anxiety for Mathilda. Of course, she must deal with frequent microaggressions that question her right to be in certain spaces—specifically those dedicated to aesthetics, such as the archives or the artists' residency in Dun. But instead of internalizing this anxiety fully, Mathilda delights in her ability to escape into her own imaginative and aesthetic world. We might consider here how this (imagined, aestheticized) *spatial* mobility chimes with the *temporal* mobility that trans folks are often denied: "Trans* people are erased from most history […] but at the

same time they are not allowed by dominant cisgender discourse ever to leave their pasts behind because they must perform the story of their 'before' and 'after' identities for the cisgendered world, telling the story of transition over and over again" (Horvat et al. 2023, 14, summarizing Lucas Crawford.) Mathilda's "Escapes" get her out of that discursive loop, whereas her imaginative and aesthetic leaps get her out of the quotidian humdrum of her physical surroundings. Take, for example, Mathilda's journey home from the archives following her discovery of Hermia Druitt's photograph:

> [I] ventured outside into a loch of granite and bobbing umbrellas. All the trains had stopped, and I would have to take three or four buses.
>
> I limited myself to a maximum of three inspections of the photograph per bus. I felt it might dissolve in my possession, but instead it became more substantial, if anything materialising not dissolving—sucking in atoms, becoming more of an object, more vivid. I became fearful that commuters would notice I had stolen something almost a century old, that it was glowing with the undeniable aura of valuable old things, of masterpieces and antiquities. But, of course, no one did notice. It was not valuable. (19)

In his writing on narrative spatializing, David Herman argues that landmarks, regions, and paths are essential textual cues because they "facilitat[e] cognitive mapping of the storyworld" and "enabl[e] the reader to chart the spatial trajectories along which the narrative unfolds" (2004, 279). And yet the landmarks, regions, and paths of Mathilda's journey are largely unarticulated: her narration gives readers no indication of what direction the buses travel, what she can see through the window, where they stop, etc. Likewise, her narration obfuscates the origins of her journey: instead of a concrete landmark, readers are left with the abstract description of a "loch of granite." The text's lack of spatializing cues signals loudly: Mathilda's imaginative world, one steeped in beauty, ornament, pleasure, and history, is much more significant to her than the physical world through which she moves. We can see this as a strategy of recovery—that which has been disparaged and hidden, including queer/Black figures such as Hermia, gets elevated above what is obvious and extant—as well as one of psychic survival for queer/Black/poor folks. And an impressively agential one at that: consider Mathilda's later description of how, "[a]t night, we swanned all about the town, which had become more palatial, more of a pleasure-ground than ever, amplified by Erskine-Lily's painting of it as much as my own will to envisage it as such" (242).

Indeed, the spaces in which Mathilda seems to be the most comfortable are the ones that reflect back to her her obsession with aesthetics. We see this clearly when she first

enters the room of kindred spirit Erskine-Lily, the genderqueer or perhaps trans Dun resident who is Black like Mathilda. While her frenemy Griselda immediately dismisses the room with “a single ocular sweep,” our heroine is mesmerized. The room, she notes, is not so much a room but art itself—she states that “nothing was there to decorate the surface since the room was decorative to the core” (200). It is also adorned with portraits of Mathilda’s “Transfixions,” those figures from the past such as Josephine Baker. As such, she immediately feels that she belongs: she narrates that the “sensations […] had returned all at once, undammed, causing me to leap up, and almost doing it now” (201). The shift from past to present tense in this sentence is but one indication of the power of Mathilda’s aesthetic-affective experience. It is also a potent indication to readers that Mathilda is now somewhere else; she has left the physical realm of Dun and moved emotionally and imaginatively to a sensually-pleasing world in which she belongs. And of course, it is perfectly ironic that Mathilda’s narration enters the “now” when she is communing with figures from the past.

This is perhaps why the narrative’s climax—Mathilda and Erskine-Lily’s discovery of Hermia’s apartment, preserved deep within the archives of the Dun artists’ residency—contains some of its most explicit and clear spatializing cues. (Spoiler alert: we eventually learn that John Garreaux’s father, founder of the residency, secretly built a subsidized apartment for the aging and penniless Hermia, with the purpose of turning it into a kind of living archive. Essentially, he sealed her off from society as a gesture of containment for the beauty and ornamentation he and his son so despised.) Fittingly, Mathilda’s and Erskine-Lily’s experience of the room largely focuses on the aesthetic objects within it. The room is only half visible to Mathilda upon entry only because it is lit by only one candle, giving it a sumptuous glow, “as if half of everything in it had been smeared in gold oil” (268). Once Erskine-Lily illuminates the space further, Mathilda—and thus readers—are immediately drawn to its opulence: the “voluminous poster bed, the draped walls, the flaked ceiling,” the “jars and bottles” on the vanity, and cupboard full of clothes, and the books on the shelves that leave Mathilda “desperately feeling the need to touch them” (268-69). Readers follow Mathilda and Erskine-Lily as they move from clothes cupboard to dressing table to bureau, “work[ing] their way round the room” (269). The scene ends with the two friends side by side on Hermia’s bed. Importantly, Mathilda richly narrates the lavish setting around the bed—the “ivory-yellow walls were draped with blanched tapestries showing faded stags, ghostly pear trees and towers” and “angels holding scrolls mid-air” with wings “in various now-limp colors, jeweled slippers and robes”—while the scene outside of the room fades into nothingness;

Mathilda can see “nothing through [the window] now that the room was lit, except for the building across the way” (269, 270).

As the two friends make their way around Hermia’s room, Mathilda sketches out a clear path of their journey by noting their movement between pieces of furniture that act as landmarks. She also gives readers clear indications of the orientation of these pieces. The bureau, for example, is “on the other side of the room” from the dressing table (269). But perhaps even more striking is the presence of clear figures and grounds in this scene. Herman, in his categorization of various types of spatializing cues, states that the “semantic structure of spatial expressions can be thought of as a dependency relation between two or more entities: a *located object* (or *figure*) and a *reference object* (or *ground*)” (274; original emphasis). He continues to explain that locative adverbs (“*forward, together, sideways*”) and prepositions (“*beyond, with, over*”) illuminate the specific relationships between various figures and grounds (274-75; original emphasis). Mathilda’s narration of Hermia’s room is dominated by figures and grounds: books are “on” shelves; papers, letters, and postcards are “inside” the bureau; the bed curtains “pull back” from the bed; the dressing table is “in front of” the main sash window (269-70). By describing the room with such specificity, Mathilda provides *LOTE*’s readers with adequate cues to develop a rich mental model of the space. Her narration, in other words, makes clear Herman’s argument that “by detaching specific incidents from the ongoing flux of experience and focusing […] readers’ attention on localized areas of concern, stories help humans structure the world into a foreground and a background to begin with, making it cognizable, manipulable, livable” (275). Both Mathilda and the novel’s readers can imaginatively and emotionally live in this space. And, crucially, it is a space out of the past. Yet again, Mathilda is most ‘here and now’ when she is actually ‘then and there.’

Erskine-Lily makes literal the methodology of Mathilda’s spatialization when the former enthuses about Hermia as follows: “The way she simply blotted everything extraneous out of her life. Or rather it wasn’t blotting out, was it? It was simply living” (236). Like Hermia, Mathilda must disregard everything “extraneous” and focus on what she deems necessary in order to live and fully be herself. A clear privileging of aesthetic objects in her narration, and aesthetics more generally, is thus not simply a preference for Mathilda but a mechanism of survival. Mathilda herself makes this even clearer when articulating the “essential difference” between herself and Griselda: “My orchidaceous fantasies = her florid night-terrors” (221). Mathilda laments that Griselda’s “eye” is one “free of all glitter,” and “proudly delusion-proof” (221)—an attitude and stance that we

clearly see above in the latter's dismissal of Erskine-Lily's room. Griselda's rejection of opulence and delusion poses a direct threat to Mathilda's being: "She was purposefully trying to stop my Transfixions, my Escape, me" (221).

Mathilda's equivalence of herself with her "Transfixions" and her "Escapes" draws a clear through-line between her true self and her experience of the world. Readers, too, must take on this way of being in the world as they work to comprehend Mathilda's narration. As she does not provide them with sufficient cues to represent the "glitter"-free world that Griselda inhabits, readers literally cannot model this space. Like Mathilda, they remain imaginatively and emotionally unmoored in this storyworld, disconnected and not belonging. Accordingly, and conversely, readers have a much easier time mentally modeling and emotionally inhabiting the spaces associated with Mathilda's "Transfixions." It is in *this* world, with its rich sets of spatializing cues, that both Mathilda and the novel's readers feel at home. And in reading Mathilda's narration, readers develop comfort with the process of cognitively and imaginatively slipping and sliding into these alternative, highly aesthetic spaces of belonging.

### *LOTE* and Intradiegetic Narratives

Mathilda's status as a protagonist-narrator brings with it an interesting history from the standpoint of queer and trans narratology. Susan Lanser has observed that queerness (which we would take here to include genderqueerness and transness) is more likely to be disguised or encoded as a characteristic of a narrator, compared to race, class, disability, and other characteristics (2021, 927). As she reminds us, given the aforementioned history of anti-obscenity and discrimination, "[t]he openly queer [or trans] narrator is, with few exceptions, a recent phenomenon" (ibid.). While, on the one hand, the lack of specificity around Mathilda's identity fits in with this status quo, we suggest that it might have a slightly different purpose—namely, resisting the didactic or sensational approaches that have so far dominated trans literature. Here, we are thinking of Pellegrini's work on narrators who resonate with "trans people's […] frustration at the demand to be visible and intelligible to a cis audience" (Pellegrini 2024, 20).

At the same time, certain narrative resources afford a special freedom to narrators in terms of gender. Lanser notes that "a narrator, as narrator, is much more able than any narrated character to operate without denoted sex" (2021, 172). As Pellegrini explains further, "[t]he pronoun I in English can suspend gender, designating he, she, and/or the

singular they, successively or simultaneously or stably or not at all" (2024, 3-4). And as von Reinhold herself has pointed out about her novel, "'Mathilda is […] narrating the story, so she could be controlling how we find [out information about her,] and her gender isn't really referenced [by her directly]'" (as quoted in Dytor 2021, n.p.).

But Mathilda is technically not the novel's only narrator: as suggested in our introduction, *LOTE* is peppered with other narratives, each with their own unique voice, typeface, and typographical features (including italics, black-out bars, drop caps, illuminated letters, and, in some cases, a lack of page numbers), that intersperse the plot of her story. These include a letter penned in 1928 in "HAUS HIRTH, *Untergrainau*" by a first-person "Jewess" writer (39; original emphasis); a (fictional) academic book by a professor named Helena Morgan titled *Black Modernisms*; a novelistic account of Hermia Druitt's life narrated in third person, featuring Hermia as the primary focalizer; and a very similar account of incidents in Mathilda's life presented in the exact same way—suggesting that the latter two types of narratives both emerge from Mathilda's imagination. While the appearance of these narratives is occasionally "motivated"—for example, we see an excerpt from *Black Modernisms* and then Mathilda's narrative indicates that she is reading it (72-73)—others are "unmotivated," meaning that they arrive abruptly and without explanation. For example, von Reinhold offers no explanation of where the letter came from, whether we are supposed to understand Mathilda as being privy to it, or, if so, how she acquired it in the first place.

These intradiegetic narratives share Mathilda's obsessions. *Black Modernisms* reports the scant details available about Hermia's life and interactions with the Bright Young Things and speculates about her origins and identity. The 1928 letter recounts adventures that the "Jewess" and Hermia have as they travel from France to Germany to meet "Stephen" (presumably Stephen Tennant). The trip is dicey; as a "Negress," Hermia is a divisive presence: "*Dizzying how it can fall with H.—the reception: either mirth or calamity dependent on something fickle, infinitesimal—the way the light hits her, and she in turn reacts, means princess or criminal, Josephine Baker or servant*" (38, original emphasis). Yet despite these racial tensions, the letter writer's emphasis remains on the lavish and pleasurable; "*Tomorrow*," she notes, "*we make a trip to Munich*" where Stephen Tennant will "*spend a small fortune on us from the sound of things*" (39; original emphasis). The novelistic account of Hermia's life is perhaps most explicitly connected to Mathilda's story. In this narrative, Hermia faces aggressions and microaggressions just like Mathilda. An anonymous letter threatens, "'*We know who you are* […] *You shall never escape us*'" (n.p.; original emphasis). And, in nearly exact echo

of the ‘twink’s’ reaction to Mathilda at the beginning of the novel, an “awful” man mistakes (or pretends to mistake) Hermia for a friend’s maid when she arrives at a Bright Young Things party: “‘My dear girl […] Surely your maid should have helped you in with that case at the very least. My god, what is she got up [dressed up] like and *where* does she think she’s going! Her lodgings will be downstairs’” (177; original emphasis). This echo further suggests that Mathilda is the source of these novelistic accounts, a phenomenon that we theorize below.

We can understand these intradiegetic narratives as having multiple functions in the novel. First, they flesh out the story of Hermia, and thus give readers direct insight into why she captivates Mathilda so. The fact that *LOTE* spends significant pages dedicated to Hermia’s life is also notable in itself, given the absence of figures like her from historical archives in both the diegetic and the ‘real’ worlds. An early excerpt from *Black Modernisms* offers one direct reason—“no definite birth record can be traced, most likely because Hermia Druitt was not her birth name” (69)—but the constant attempts by White characters to prevent Black characters’ entry into aesthetically-rich spaces also points strongly to the racism driving such absences. As Caoimhe Harlock puts it, “LOTE recognizes the insufficiency of archive and history as a home for the marginalized” (2022, n.p). In this sense, we can read the novel as modeling one approach to ameliorating real-world absences and, further, see how von Reinhold is making a case for her own obsessively aesthetic approach: creativity, speculation, and imagination are necessary tools of recovering and illuminating marginalized figures in a world that would otherwise have them exist only as gaps in the record. And if we understand Mathilda as the source of the aforementioned novelistic accounts, then she as a character is doing the same: spinning out a story where there would otherwise be silence. In this way, the novel and its protagonist model a version of what Saidiya Hartman has called “critical fabulation”: “straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the [oppressed] and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing [such lives] precisely through the process of narration” (2008, 11).

*LOTE*’s intradiegetic narratives also have a second, powerfully imaginative function. When readers encounter these narrators, they have to engage with what Herman calls a “deictic shift.” He identifies deictic shifts as yet another category of narrative spatialization, and defines them as the mechanisms “whereby narrators prompt their interlocutors to relocate from the HERE and NOW of the act of narration to other space-time coordinates—namely, those defining the perspective from which the events of the story are recounted” (2004, 271). He notes that while “*all* storytellers cue their

audiences to transport themselves from the spatiotemporal parameters of the current interaction to those defining a storyworld […] deictic shifts play an especially important role in what are commonly called frame narratives" (ibid., 271-72; original emphasis). To state this more plainly, all readers must make an imaginative leap to a new world when they work to comprehend a narrative; they must imaginatively and emotionally slip from the physical world of their reading environment to the storyworld of the narrative. And when readers encounter an intradiegetic narrative, or a story within a story, they must repeat this process of shift and reorientation. When we apply this concept to *LOTE*, we understand that readers imaginatively slip into Mathilda's world at the very moment that the 'twink' questions her right to be in the archives. (Indeed, his words form the first two sentences of the novel.) But because Mathilda's narration is so often interrupted by alternate intradiegetic narratives/voices, readers must perform this shift again and again: once with the Jewess' letter, five times with *Black Modernisms*, an additional four times with the novelistic account of Hermia's doings, and twice more with the novelistic accounts focused on Mathilda herself. Yet again, the very form of the novel demands that readers practice the imaginative and emotional shifts into new, highly aesthetic worlds that sustain its protagonist. The fact that these narratives are typographically as well as narratorially distinct from Mathilda's main story (the excerpts from *Black Modernisms* and the novelistic accounts of Hermia's life do not have page numbers, for example) only heightens readers' sense of slipping and sliding continually between worlds.

## Conclusion

Inspired by Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, narratologist H. Porter Abbott draws a "distinction between closure (or the lack of it) at the level of expectations and closure at the level of questions" (2008, 65) in written narratives. The ending of *LOTE* provides a vivid example of this distinction. It offers closure at the level of expectations, insofar as the quest to learn more about Hermia and her fate is seemingly fulfilled. Satisfyingly, Mathilda also reunites with some acquaintances from earlier in the novel, who prove to be allies in getting Hermia's obscure poetry republished. But *LOTE* does not offer closure at the level of questions, raising several about Mathilda's identity and even the ontological status of the whole novel. In the last section, Mathilda describes an encounter with someone identified only as a "person" on a side street in Dun: "as they turned around I thought, just for a moment, just like the year before [when she first spotted Erskine-Lily], that I was looking at Hermia's apparition" (368). Mathilda

introduces herself—"'I'm Hermia,' I said"—to which the person cheerily replies, "'So similar to my name. Isn't that abominable?'" (369). Has Mathilda adopted Hermia's identity as some kind of homage or alter ego—one of the "Escapes" alluded to earlier in the novel that coincide with her name changing? And has this other person done something similar? Has the past in which Hermia existed somehow started overlapping with the more recent era of Mathilda's story? Or was there never actually a Hermia Druitt to begin with in the storyworld, and the plot just an elaborate fantasy on our protagonist-narrator's part?

The latter two possibilities seem unlikely given what has transpired throughout the bulk of the novel. But they are nonetheless tantalizingly raised early on, when the 'twink' insists that the photograph of Hermia is "contemporary," "no more than 30 years old" (32).[viii] Most likely, though, it's something like the first two possibilities, which would conceptually jibe with von Reinhold's concern for lost and neglected figures, as well as with Mathilda becoming a character in the last two novelistic accounts. Put another way, adopting Hermia's identity offers yet another, and rather innovative, way to recover a lost and neglected figure: Mathilda, or Mathilda-as-Hermia, serves as living history or, better, living art. We might also point out that what many might call glaringly absent data—namely, the gender of the person Mathilda encounters—seems to need no clarification in her breezy summary.[ix] Again, our protagonist-narrator gives us what she thinks matters and not what she thinks doesn't.

However we interpret the novel's ending, it's clear that *LOTE* is deeply engaged with what queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman has called "queer belonging": a yearning to "'hold out' a hand across time and touch the dead or those not born yet, to offer oneself beyond one's own time" (2007, 299). Indeed, this notion sounds just like Mathilda's description of "celestial siblinghood" (22): a feeling "of not only recognising" a kindred spirit, "but of having been recognised" (20). She offers herself to these queer kindred spirits beyond her own time but also, crucially, beyond her own space and place.

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[i] The back cover features a blurb from writer Torrey Peters, while the Duke Website features blurbs from scholars such as McKenzie Wark. For more on von Reinhold, see Fiona Alison Duncan (2023, n.p.). Finally, see Joonas Säntti on how extratextual information informs queer narratological readings (2022, 23).
[ii] Cody Mejeur and Pellegrini's special issue of *Narrative*, "Trans/forming Narratology," will appear in 2024.
[iii] See Narea and Cineas (2023).
[iv] As writer Fiona Alison Duncan observes, the novel describes Mathilda's "Transfixions" "with such sensual amplitude that you might miss the word play: trans fictions" (2023, n.p.).
[v] See Trish Salah's "Transgender and Transgenre Writing" (2021).
[vi] In 2020, Thomas's *Cemetery Boys* became "the first trans-centered fiction book by an openly trans author to make the *New York Times* bestseller list" (Hyun Kim 2020, n.p.).

[vii] Of course, the link between form/aesthetics/ornament on the one hand and queerness on the other can be deployed in the opposite direction; as the author of the fictional *Black Modernisms* observes of Hermia's period, "the Wilde trials were still very much in the air, with 'decadence' and 'aestheticism' effectively operating as bywords for homosexuality" (von Reinhold 2020, 112).
[viii] We might also note that Hermia is rumored to be of Nigerian origin (von Reinhold 2020, 67), while Mathilda's last name, Adamarola, also has Nigerian (Yoruban) origins.
[ix] Mathilda also does not specify the person's race but, given that Hermia is specified as Black, we can read this doppelganger as such.