3.5 Shola von Reinhold in Conversation with Benjamin Bateman

Transcript

Aarthi Vadde
Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas and scholarship. I'm one of your hosts, Aarthi Vadde. You'll be hearing from John Plotz and our excellent co-hosts over the course of the season. As our listeners know, Novel Dialogue brings novelists and literary critics together to talk about novels from every angle: how we read, write, publish, and remember them.

And today I have the pleasure of being in the virtual studio with Shola von Reinhold and Ben Bateman. Shola is the author of the much-lauded *Lote,* which I like to think of as a novel that brings decadence into and out of the archive. It entangles blackness, queerness, and the legacy of modernism in intoxicating ways, and I can't think of a better critic to engage those themes than Ben Bateman, who is the author of *The Modernist Art of Queer Survival* and is currently at work on a book about the concept of queer disappearance. Ben is also a lecturer in English at the University of Edinburgh and the head judge of the James Tait Black Prize, which by the way *Lote* won in 2020. So welcome, Shola and Ben. Thank you so much for being here today.

Shola von Reinhold
Thank you for having us.

Ben Bateman
Yeah, thank you.

AV
Now Ben, I am going to pass the mic to you, and I can't wait to hear this novel come alive as critic and author start their dialogue.

BB
Thanks, Aarthi, and it is a fantastic novel and it's my pleasure to be talking to Shola today. And I want to begin by asking a question that I think many people want to ask of some of their favorite writers and that is, Shola, when did you know that you wanted to be a writer and how did you get your start writing fiction?

SVR
I think from, like I think like a lot of writers actually, quite young, like must have been maybe eight when I remember writing, and like trying to write a novel and then sending it, must be like 20 pages long and I remember sending, vividly, sending it to agents and publishers, which is a really annoying thing for an eight-year-old to be doing. I think I thought I was really precocious when I was eight, but I was really just like very good at performing precociousness as seen on TV.

BB

That's great, and I think that you know because one has to take that leap to deciding you know I want to be a writer and it's a conceptual leap. It's also a leap of courage as you say, and maybe one needs kind of the courage of someone very young to be able to do that.

I also want to ask you, perhaps slightly oddly, but it is my pleasure to be interviewing you today. But because we're thinking about how you came to be a writer and who inspired you, I wanted to ask if you were in my position and you could interview any novelist, living or dead, who would it be, and what would you ask them?

SVR
So at the moment, partly because I'm kind of working on something about him, someone that also features in *Lote* would be Richard Bruce Nugent, which for those who don't know, Nugent was an artist and a writer who was right at the epicenter of the Harlem Renaissance and he was also kind of on the fringes of it, at least retrospectively or historically. And he was at odds with it. Just like he was almost at odds with every milieu he found himself throughout his life and his novels never got published. These books were written mostly in the 20s and 30s, and they're full of like Harlem Renaissance parties, super queer, lots of cruising and sort of boozing and high camp badinage all the way through. And I don't know what I'd ask, and I'd probably just ask him for more explicit details about all of his friends and lovers. Like was he really dating his way through the ranks of the New York and Chicago mobsters and crime bosses and playing them against each other, for example.

And I also, oh yeah, I also like would love to know about his exploits in Europe. So for example, he auditioned, I think in the 20s, maybe the 30s, can't remember now, he auditioned for a part in *Porgy,* for *Porgy* the musical as a sort of prank. He went with his friends and then a bunch of them got the part. So they were then consequently sort of shuttled around Europe and maybe elsewhere in the world and sort of in these planes and just had it, sounded like they had a great time, having all these private parties and then he met a lot of figures in the UK, including people like maybe E.M. Forster. There's a reference in the book called *When Harlem was in Vogue* which mentions Nugent on his way to the country with E.M. Forster and met loads of other Bloomsbury group figures and I'm really interested, so yeah, I would definitely ask him about all of that because I'm interested in the influences of Black artists and luminaries of that period on literary modernism, which has been historically presented as even, an even whiter domain than other sort of elite enclaves, especially with reference to UK modernism, Bloomsbury modernism, but is, in fact, foundationally, constitutionally black.

And Nugent was very much part of all of that. And all of these, I'm like so fascinated by all of these sort of English dandies he would have met and he would have put to shame, I think because he was just so much more salacious and vicious than they were, and I'm always reminded of that when I think of Nugent, I'm always reminded of that Saidiya Hartman phrase, which is like, I'm going to get it wrong now like, "The flapper was a pale imitation of the ghetto girl." And Hartman also used this phrase "the aesthetical Negro" and I always think that you know, Nugent kind of constitutes this idea also, that the European or just the white dandy, the white modernist dandy was a sort of dive to me for the glamour of the Black…figures like Nugent and all of his predecessors.

BB
Shola in listening to you talk, I mean one of the things I find so fascinating about your style, your approach is that you, your writing is so embedded in your own research. I mean, you're talking about a modernist figure here, Richard Bruce Nugent, thinking about the artistic circles that Nugent was circulating in. How much of the writing process for you is research?

SVR
Yeah, I'd say about 50%, when a good few years ago it was, there was little to no research. But yeah, now 50%, even when it's something working on at the moment which is way less sort of referential, it's way less, it way less comes out of a historical period, I suppose, but it's still, there's still like, it still passes in and out of, you know, the research passes in and out of the writing.

AV
How often do you find that your research takes you into places where you felt, had this not been an archive of Black life, answers would have been available here and now I'm coming up against opacities, or I'm coming up against what feels like an institutional failure to have just preserved.

SVR
At the time of writing *Lote*, for example, that, maybe that wasn't so much of an issue in that, or was an issue, it was just so present that it didn't feel like coming up against it, it was just the sort of soup in which like was swimming, which we were all swimming I guess, like making, sort of trying to make this work. And now it's become, it is a real issue like I'm working on a book which is about Black modernist figures in Britain and there's so many voids, so many archival voids that are really, really tricky to deal with in so many ways.

BB
You strike me as an author that is engaged with theory in various ways. Do you think that would be a sort of fair characterization of *Lote*?

SVR
Yeah, against my own volition.

AV
Say more about that, because you have mentioned your interest in the salacious and the gossipy side of these worlds, because there's obviously something substantial to it that maybe we haven't regarded, but theory has a kind of cultural capital associated with it, that those other terms maybe don't, like gossip and *Lote* does bring both together in very kind of unexpected ways.

SVR
I don't really want to write about theory, but it just keeps coming, it just keeps coming up again and again, and like it's inescapable in like various ways. And there is like I guess, I was going to say well there is like a, there is an answer to your question about this relation between you know, sort of like in quotes, “minor” forms of knowledge and information holding which like really, really, really intrigues me. A lot of my work at the moment is about ornament and pattern, and ornamentality is like this other register that holds and deposits information and other ways of, just various other ways of being.

So there's like something going on there which I can't really articulate. But I don't know, I've also just been thinking about how, I'm also a little bit wary sometimes of talking about gossip now because I feel like it's going to become like the new sort of self-care, like workshops on it, a whole industry on it, like it's really important that people recognize this like really complicated, fascinating, interesting history and practice. But yeah, I also get a little bit scared talking about it at the moment.

BB
Sort of in relation to that and as well as to some themes in *Lote,* sort of within queer theory, Benji Kahan's most recent book *The Book of Minor Perverts* where he's looking at various kinds of queer sexualities and gender identities that didn't quite survive into the consolidation of queer identity in the mid to late 20th century, right? So we have our received categories of homosexuality, heterosexuality, and so on. But the book traces these more minor sexuality and gender identities that exist, sort of fleetingly or barely in the archive, right, and confronts the question of how do you bring those out, right. And that, it sort of leads me to my next question, Shola, because *Lote* is so invested in modernism as a category and you've talked about Richard Bruce Nugent already. You've also mentioned E.M. Forster right, a more kind of canonical figure within modernism. And one of the things that *Lote* explores so lusciously, if I could put it that way, is the position of decadence within modernism, and within late 19th and early 20th century writing. And I wanted to ask, you know, just how influenced are you by modernism and the literature of that time, and what rivets your imagination to it? What is that attachment to modernism, and to that period that you've mentioned already of the 1920s in the 1930s?

SVR
I love the sound of that book, by the way, please send the title of it to me.

I think, well, yeah, it was super formative to like my actual experience of reading in the first place, like Woolf and Forster really populated my imagination when I was like I don't know how old like 16, 17, 18. And therefore it's always been kind of really, really romantic to me, the modernist periods, the interwar modernist periods I should say, in spite of so much to the contrary, there's so much that was deeply unromantic about that time in the UK, for example. And that romance sort of grew increasingly fraught for me, especially when I was starting to write around modernism. And it was it was becoming more and more of like a, it was sort of penetrating the substance of my everyday life, and I guess in turn that, both that romance and broadness tendered another kind of fascination in relation to modernism.

But yeah, I don't know if it's something, I don't know if it's something particular about the way the period was being sort of documented formally, sort of yet formally at the time or otherwise, or if it was simply because the periods, that the period came to me at the at the very age that sort of anything becomes highly formative. But yeah, all these sort of modernist ghosts are really easy to bring up in my head with the sort of lightest touch, to inevitably come back to them even again, even when I try not to come and sort of yeah, each time finding new voids and aporia keep presenting themselves to me. I thought I was done with interwar literary modernism with *Lote*, but there's so many figures that keep coming up again and all the new, or new strange encounters and sort of archival counters, I guess, that that pulls me back.

BB
Yeah, and it's also something that pulls your readers in, I think, or at least this reader, I will say. But it also makes me think that you know, you've just used the word figures a couple of times, and we've talked about research in the way that you've studied modernism in the interwar period, and the way that these literary figures kind of impress themselves upon you and there is this strong archival component to the work that you're doing. I was also wanting to know, though, to what extent modernism remains a kind of inspiration to you at the level of form, right? So you're, you know, *Lote* very much sizes up I think in many ways the limits of canonical modernism, right, in terms of who gets excluded, what voices don't we hear and so on, but there seems to be something about the style of modernism that remains available to you or interesting to you and then gets reflected in the experiment that is *Lote*. Do you think so?

SVR
Yeah, yeah, and I think it's, yeah, and that is the part of the kind of like archival questions that are going, I don't know if I would say archival questions, or the deep part of like the interaction with sort of dead figures and dead ideas that like *Lote* is woven out of which informs the form. When you go back and look at these figures or track or bring them to light, I kind of hate that expression, bring them to light, when that maybe hasn't happened for a long time or ever happened, then yes, certainly like the kind of formal contiguity then becomes possible, I think, if that makes sense because all of these kind of truncated, singed away, cut off substances and ghosts and lives are back again. *Lote* is interested in, you know you mentioned like fin de siècle decadence, for example, that's interested in the continuity between yeah, the fin de siècle purpleness and the supposedly sort of muscular, super white, bleached modernist modes. And then you have all these people like Virginia Woolf and in between those who clearly present sort of so many, so many contradictions of that. And then you have someone like Richard Bruce Nugent, who really, really presents contradictions of that as well.

BB
I loved your expression there of the muscular modernism and the idea that you are recovering in many ways, or we might think of your character Mathilda, in *Lote,* as recovering versions of modernism that perhaps aren't so muscular. And it leads me to ask you along those lines of recovery, I see *Lote* as being a recovery of romance and you've spoken of your own kind of romance with modernism. But also, a romance of recovery in certain respects as well, right, where the drama of this story, of *Lote*, is Mathilda trying to learn more about this archive that is frustratingly unavailable to Mathilda at certain moments. And I just wonder how you, in terms of your own relationship to modernism, let's say vis-a-vis Mathilda's relationship to it, what all are you wanting to recover?

SVR
Yeah, I find the idea of romance of recovery, yeah, is a really beautiful way of thinking about it. In some ways I find the idea of the book itself as trying to do something kind of slightly jarring or at odds with like my actual experience writing with it, because I didn't go about it in sort of any sort of utilitarian way, or any sort of A to B process, of trying to make this or to make that happen. And every time I try to describe it, almost anytime I try to describe it as anything beyond this kind of like illogical, magical process, I'm being a little bit dishonest just for the sake of easiness, which I do a lot when talking about it. But there is I guess, you know, thinking about recovery, that like definitely yes there was a void, that void that we've touched on in British literary modernism, that I wanted to not so much as, maybe not so much as fill, but as trace or describe.

So you know the fact that I couldn't find a Black British woman poet or novelist between the wars working in the so-called high modernist tradition, that was something to do with it initially, because obviously contrary to so many depictions of British history, there were numerous Black women artists working and living here before the Windrush, a point which I think is now much more understood than five years ago, 10 years ago or even a few years ago when it was, when I was writing *Lote*, like a lot of, like this wasn't such available information. And yeah, and it seemed to me that like, why wouldn't she, this poet, who's, you know, in the book Hermia, be deeply inculcated in romance and frivolity and beauty, and ornamentality and so on, as if Modernism always had that kind of romantic, decadent streak to it, in spite of retrospective attempts to periodize it as that muscular, new modes, doing away with all the decay and the dust and the mold of the fin de siècle and you know, and also let's face Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater and all of that kind of that, that suggests you know the deep modernist fear of faggotry that was going on even whilst like it was so deeply present.

AV
I, too, have been thinking so much about this in light of the centenary of *Ulysses*, I'm teaching the novel this semester and thinking about it, reading it after you know the upheavals of the last decade, and you know, I can't help but notice Cranly so much this time around, this friend who seemed to have some subterranean attraction between young Steven and Cranly, and then also trying to think about Circe and what's going to happen in light of the way that gender transformations take place in that chapter. I mean it seems frankly transphobic, but I'm you know, how does one teach that after recognizing how phobic it is, and I feel like these questions haven't really been worked out yet and so I'm wondering to either of you, to both of you, you know, you're not going to solve this problem for us, I'm not asking you to do that, but what kinds of questions should we be asking of modernism and how do we address the complete gap between the kinds of conversations that are happening on the grounds of young people's lives, whether it's in social media or in classrooms, in college and the way that we teach these old books?

SVR
I, yeah. I will defer to that, it would take me too long to think about that. But yeah, it's an amazing question.

BB
There are a number of ways I think to comment on that question. I mean, I do think that in asking the question, Aarthi, you have already articulated the problem in many respects, which is that we still don't center queerness in the way that we teach and think about literature across many institutions, right, that it's still possible for someone to take a class on *Ulysses,* as I did when I was an undergraduate, and talk about queerness not at all, right. Now that was a number of years ago, it wasn't that many years ago though, right, and I think that we would find in many classrooms still that queerness, along with matters of race, at the same time, and I think that goes back to a point Shola was making earlier, are not centered within discussions of modernism. They often exist on the fringes. There are kind of peripheral matter. And people fail to attend to how absolutely central they were, even just if central at the level of a prohibition or a kind of taboo in particular ways.

I often teach, because we've talked a lot about British modernism, so far. I often teach quite a bit of American modernism as well, and in particular, Willa Cather, who has a very complicated relationship to queer archives. But Cather has this story from 1905, a short story called "Paul's Case," that it's inconceivable to me and to most of my students, I think, when I teach it now, that the story could ever have been taught without focusing on Paul's queerness, his gender nonconformity, his attraction to other men, I mean, many, many aspects to his queerness. But it really wasn't, and this was a story that was taught in the United States for many, many years. It was taught in high schools, for example, and it was all just about the dangers of this overly artistic daydreaming young boy, right? He's got his head in the clouds and that causes him to go off the rails, not just go off the rails but ultimately throw himself in front of a train and it just speaks to the degree to which queerness is elided from so much of the way that we think about literature, and particularly the canon, much less than other texts that have been left out of the canon, and it gets us to think critically at least, and this is the last I'll say on this, about the relationship between what is ignored in the canon, and what has been ignored outside of the canon, right, that's--

AV
Right.

Shola, can I ask you to speak a little bit more about your interest in ornamentality? Because when I hear that term I think of, in some ways, the antithetical concept to that muscular modernism that came up earlier. And there probably is an encrypted relationship between ornamentality and primitivism, which was again something that many modernists engaged in in the way that they appropriated the work of other races and cultures. And so I'm just curious what you're doing with ornamentality and how you're using it in your in your current work.

SVR
It's really tricky question to answer. Whenever I'm asked around ornament, just because it is such a vast arena. I guess, you know, it appears in *Lote*, it's mentioned in *Lote* as this historically, you know by one of the characters, as this historically denigrated site, you know, it's always lesser than fine arts, you know as concept, and it's barbaric as I think Hegel says, and it's obviously criminal as Adolf Loos says, and whenever these things are said, they are, ornament is characterized as this, effete, effeminate, epicene, racialized figure, or just like one of those, but sometimes all, more often than not all of the above and all and also yes, this idea of like super colonial ideas of the primitive are written into it. And that's intrigued me for a really long time. And then obviously there's this other side of it which is related to the, well it's not another side, it's the same side, which is the idea, you know, ornament always exceeding. It's a thing of superfluous excretion, it's a thing of too-muchness and at the same time it's too hollow, it's cosmetic-ness means that it's considered not enough, it's valueless and within all of that, there's obviously the idea of the, you know ornament then being a historical site which has been available to people to whom other forms aren't available, it's frivolities, exactly where it's like, maybe transgressiveness lies. But then also there's the idea of not even want, of like just enjoying it for this ornament for ornament's sake, like the question of, yeah, like kind of instrument, sort of instrumentalizing it. you know after realizing that it's frivolities, being this really kind of exquisite, wonderful place, in which, like various forms of knowledge and hope and sensory living can exist, to then, kind of to instrumentalize that you know, like almost which like I'm doing now by talking about, as like a useful site is kind of like what I've been thinking around at the moment.

But, and a lot of my thoughts about ornament you know which really derived in material ornament in objects, and then moved a little bit towards, you know, ornament in literature, you know the ornamentality of literature, or the decorative mode, which obviously you know, like maybe the most available, like so quickly available to my mind, at the moment, the thing you could link it to is what Susan Sontag called "stylization," which was, also, which is also what she calls camp right? And then like too, but, so, like and then it's gone like sort of sideways even more into this idea of like ornamentality as a way of being, so you know, at the moment I'm really fascinated by, Doris Payne, "Diamond Doris." who's a jewel thief, I think she's now in her 80s or maybe 90s now. But you know, she started stealing diamonds in the 70s in, I think she's from I think she's from West Virginia, but I'm not 100% sure, but, you know, her life was informed by mining and by the atrocities of mining and her stealing, which arose out of this need, it's a method of, a means of survival and of looking after her mother. Her stealing of diamonds is also compacted by this political rage against sort of all kinds of mining industries, diamond, gold and coal and I've been thinking about the way in which like alongside this need came this other need, which was how she actually steals these diamonds, these ornaments, right? Which is through ornamentality. She takes such pleasure in describing the kind of like sleights of hands and the kind of like strange sort of sparkling insinuations that she conjures up when she's in Tiffany's, when she's stealing in Monaco before you know, going into a hotel and having lavish time then booking a flight out of the country and also in the way that she's still stealing to this day. And kind of wrapping in her own

sort of myth of ornament, of being an ornamental being, into kind of maybe getting slightly shorter prison times now and getting out.

So there's like this performance of ornamentality which really fascinates me, which is to do with artifice and self-making and the managing of your own identity, which you could obviously relate to like, Glissant, maybe, or to various theorists of Black sensuousness, of Black sensory life. There's sort of two way, there's this two way stream--sorry for mixing so many metaphors--two way stream of ornament, which is, one that it's of ornamental living, one that it's this really self, you can self-perpetuate pleasure just by doing it. But also it is this historical method of survival as well.

BB
I think I have just one more question, which is, I believe, a standard question for this podcast, Shola.

AV
But now I feel embarrassed by the term standard so--

BB
Not standard! Sorry, standard in its exquisiteness, which is, Shola, if you could snap your fingers and possess some new talent, what would it be and why that talent?

SVR
Oh my goodness. Okay, within sort of the earthly worlds, the place we're talking, I don't know. I think maybe it would just be like being able to play the piano, because that was something I wanted to do. I tried to teach myself when I was young and then it just wasn't so sort of easy to pursue I guess, as a thing. But then maybe that means that it wasn't--I think actually I'd just love to be a really good singer. Like that would, like my ego would enjoy that in so many ways as well. What about both of you?

AV
I like how the first answer was almost like the prepared answer and then this the effusive answer came out, you know, "I want to be a singer."

SVR
A really good one.

AV
Yes.

Well, thank you both for joining us today and for talking so scintillatingly about modernism. It's a topic close to my heart.

So, as we approach the end of another Novel Dialogue, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, Public Books for its partnership, and acknowledge support from Brandeis University and Duke University.

Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern and designer, Claire Ogden is our sound engineer, and James Draney is our blog editor. Look out for upcoming episodes with Chang-rae Lee, Ruth Ozeki and Colm Tóibín.

So from all of us here at Novel Dialogue, thanks for listening and if you liked what you heard, please subscribe on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.