7.5 Machine, System, Code: Masande Ntshanga and Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra (EH)

Transcript

Emily Hyde

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 Emily Hyde, one of your hosts and co-producers of this season. And today we are lucky to be here for a conversation between the novelist Masande Ntshanga and the critic Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra. At *Novel Dialogue*, we bring together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work, how they're written, read, studied, and remembered. And so I am really excited to hear these two talk about South African writing and, I think, speculative fiction.

Masande Ntshanga is the winner of the inaugural PEN International New Voices Award and is the author of two novels, *The Reactive*, winner of the Betty Trask Award in 2018, and *Triangulum* nominated for a 2020 Nommo Award for Best Speculative Novel. His most recent book is *Native Life in the Third Millennium*, a kind of a hybrid of poetry and prose. And that book was published by Model See Media, which Masande established in 2020 as the world's first pop-up publisher of experimental literature, art, and code. He teaches in the creative writing program at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, where he also edits the literary journal *New Contrast*.

Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra is an associate professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the Pennsylvania State University. She is a scholar of Latin American and African literatures and is also a very good friend of the podcast. Listeners might remember that she previously appeared in the fifth season of Novel Dialogue in conversation with Mariana Enríquez. A recipient of the Humboldt Fellowship, Magalí is currently a visiting researcher at the University of Cologne in Germany, and is the co-editor of the digital platform Global South Studies.

My job as host is now just to kind of step into the background, so Magalí, I'll hand things over to you.

Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra

Hi, Emily. Thank you for this, and Masande, thank you so much for joining us today. I'm really looking forward to this conversation.

I wanted to start off by talking about place and setting in your work. So the spark for me was thinking about the role of Cape Town in *The Reactive* and the ways in which your characters' movement between different parts of the city and the different neighborhoods of the city sort of structures and moves and sometimes slows down or even stalls the narrative, but as often also comes up in your novels, these are places drenched with history. And so setting is also doing a lot

of thematic work in addition to structural work in the narrative. The former Ciskei Republic or homeland in the Eastern Cape at the turn of this millennium, for instance, is a crucial setting in *Triangulum* as is a kind of speculative Johannesburg of the 2020s.

So I wanted to start our conversation today by asking, how do you think about the role of place in your work and particularly the ways in which it structures your narratives?

Masande Ntshanga

Sure, sure. Thank you. First of all, thank you, Emily, for such a great introduction. And thank you both for having me.

Setting has always been very important to me as a writer. It's got to do with my own kind of biography as well as how I've seen history kind of play out in my society. Both novels kind of approach setting in ways that are similar, but also quite different and I'll get into that.

The idea for the first novel, *The Reactive*, at first I had this idea that I wanted to kind of write a contemporary novel that was dealing with 21st century issues and one that could kind of be interchangeable with any other global city really dealing with youth culture intersecting with sexuality, recreational drug use, technology and such. But the more I worked on it as this kind of every-city kind of setting, I felt there was something that was kind of lacking in it. And part of that I think, well, I would eventually conclude is that I wasn't actually allowing the setting or South Africa's like singular nature and all its various stratifications, actually into the narrative. And the reason for that as well is it can be a very intimidating place to write about, partly because it's still so fractured in terms of its political and social geography.

So what we have most of the time are a host of writers who are kind of working from the individual corners and will write about this particular community, which is living in parallel rather than integration with the next community, which is kind of the story of South Africa having come from a very segregated society under the apartheid regime. And so the more I worked on the novel, the more I realized that actually that's something I couldn't keep from it as much as I had my characters and I could place my characters in certain places, in the city of Cape Town based on where they were from. There was a kind of static quality to the book or a stagnant quality to the book. And I knew that it needed this kind of mobility between the spaces.

As much as it's a story about the characters, it's also a story about what the city was in 2003 or the early 21st century, and getting them to move around, getting them to go across Cape Town through different communities, through different class categories, was as important a portrait as it was for the characters. And as much as the characters were observing where they were, they were also kind of being reflected as well by these settings. So for me, discovering that parallel as I was working on the novel was actually quite important. Starting to see, perhaps if I can think of it in technological terms, if my characters were these pieces of hardware and their consciousnesses were operating systems, then the cities that contain them are these larger machines and pieces of hardware that also have an operating system as far as culturally and economic systems.

And I do try to balance the two because I think they're important in literature, this idea of being able to distill human experience but also to give an appraisal of societal systems. And in doing that, I mean, setting becomes indispensable, you know, and it's also a really indispensable part of South

African history. And it's funny because later we'll go on to talk about speculative fiction, but so many of these places actually, if you take away how they've been written in terms of kind of received stories and national narratives, you discover that for the most part, there are large parts of the country that are underwritten and as soon as you kind of venture into those spaces, it's almost as if it's speculative, even though it's realism, because you're kind of like charting ground that hasn't been touched on. And that ground has a story to tell about the city itself, about the country, and also about the characters.

And I remember with this novel in particular, I was living in Cape Town at the time when I composed it. And just kind of seeing how stratified the city was, at least into these two binaries where there was a class of people that commuted into the city to work and to kind of become a slave or an almost like servant class for people who are in the city purely for leisure. And starting to think about what kind of setting or city or machine arranges people according to units of labor or units of leisure and what the history of that is actually and also its present and possible future.

MAT

I love the detail of there being a version of *The Reactive* that wasn't explicitly set in Cape Town, right, because coming to it as a reader, it seems inseparable from place, from setting, from the kind of geographic function of movement. There's so much time spent on transport: buses, trains, sort of taxis, right, the characters are taking the buses. It also feels inextricable because there's that interest in history and in historical figures and in what might have been happening in this place a century before or two centuries before, I think there's one moment where a character comments about the market and enslaved people and what's today Green Market Square and so on. There's a real interest in that texture of place, which this brings me to a question that takes us towards speculative fiction, but not quite there yet, in part because the relation with history is so compelling in your work, ways in which you're engaging the multiple layers of history, especially as they relate to place.

I was interested in it because I see this quite distinct from the modalities of historical fiction, which tend to emphasize taking the reader back to a prior moment, right, and narrating that prior moment. And you even have portions of *Triangulum* that are set in the, as much as it pains me to say, the kind of relative past, right, that sort of turn of the millennium, your interest tends to be much more in how the past reverberates in the present and in the future, rather than the past itself. And so when Emily and I were chatting about your work yesterday, one of the things that came up was this idea of the presence of history, in a mode other than historical fiction, where it appears in your work as somehow, one of the words that came up, I think it was the word that Emily used for spooky, there's something spooky about the presence of history in your work. And, you know, having given you that word, I was curious how you think about how history sort of reverberating through the layers of both *The Reactive* and the *Triangulum*.

MN

I love that you used spooky. I have a friend of mine who kind of refers to it as hauntology.

MAT

Perfect.

MN

And yeah, that's definitely a very, very important part of setting for me specifically, actually, to return to *The Reactive*, because the apartheid regime at some point ends and then we enter like a new kind of leadership, which is at first quite optimistic. But by the time that we reach the novel setting in 2003, some of that enthusiasm or optimism has begun to wane because we have a new government that's beginning to make new unilateral decisions. And on top of that as well, I mean, South Africa was a revolutionary society. But at the same time, it was the democratics of Africa was kind of birthed as well through a lot of negotiation. So structurally, as far as like what happened in spatial apartheid, a lot of that still persists. And there's also kind of intergenerational effects of what that regime did.

So what you have and what I used to actually experience while living in Cape Town, is, yeah, this kind of layered history, you know, having the monuments all the way back from colonialism to apartheid, but now coexisting in like urban spaces, which are almost antithetical in terms of the communities that inhabit them to what those monuments stand for. And really, really like old buildings that are like evocative of centuries, you know, of colonial history and strife and even apartheid resistance now coinciding as well with globalization and late-stage capitalism. And it's kind of like walking into this torrent of different historical currents all at once. You'll walk somewhere and, you know, look down and suddenly you're confronted with, you know, the state and what would have been happening in this area, you know, whether it's enslaved people being delivered or one of the key moments of resistance against apartheid and or perhaps even like the first McDonald's, you know, to be erected.

MAT

Which is actually an important part of the story of city and infrastructure, right, that those things pop up, too. And also in terms of the interest youth culture that comes up in your novels in a whole range of ways, both high and low.

Let's come to the question about speculative fiction that we've been sort of teasing already a little bit.

MN

Sure.

MAT

Because *Triangulum* is very straightforwardly a work of speculative fiction, right? Portions of the narrative are set in the future. There's speculative technologies, there's the possibility of extraterrestrial life. These are all, let's say, it's hitting marks that would identify it as part of the genre, but an interest in speculative and science fiction kind of runs through much of your work. So there's a reference to Samuel Delany's *Equinox* that pops up in *The Reactive*. The idea of the alien, although not quite the same kind of alien pops up in your short story "Space" from 2013 for which you won the PEN Award. So it's something that keeps coming back. And I think it's matched also with that interest in technology.

So in a sense, *Triangulum* is of its moment. Speculative fiction is having a kind of boom in writing from the African continent. But I'm curious about what's particularly compelling or generative for you about the speculative as a way of thinking.

MN

Oh, wow. It's both biographical. I mean, most things begin that way for me. And then later, it becomes intellectual or rather imaginative and then intellectual. I've been working on this, I just finished this piece recently, actually, that had to do a lot with how I came to write *Triangulum* and instead of kind of being an essay that approaches the work cerebrally and, you know, kind of cites, what might have inspired it in terms of other texts, but really begins at the beginning. And having myself come from a homeland, which I would later kind of understand as like an instrument of apartheid government or a scientific instrument, actually, like a technology.

MAT

Could you break that down for us very briefly? So I know it's a very dense idea that you just put forward, but just make sure all of our listeners are following along with you because I love that idea about the technology.

MN

Yeah, so a lot of apartheid policy at the time, I mean, somehow, you know, the way that we view history and science can be kind of flattened, I think, just from having certain narratives kind of repeated and framed a certain way. And what I enjoy in a lot of writers that I like and literature is this ability to kind of take a different vantage point and reinvigorate or make something new again without necessarily taking away from its meaning.

And so the idea for me of apartheid is, you know, technocratic, yes, white supremacist, but also very experimental in nature as well, in the worst way, of course, like in a way that was completely inhumane. So when I, and this is where it begins, when I'm born, I'm born in what is then known as white South Africa, but my mother and I are not permitted to have citizenship in white South Africa. So we actually have to drive a couple of kilometers from the hospital, leaving the border to settle in Mdantsane. And Mdantsane was a township segregated area restricted to, you know, the native population, and really almost like, really brutal conditions, you know, which still persist today, actually, if you visit the areas.

And so not only that, but it was an experiment in social engineering, as most of spatial apartheid was. So even then, my mother and I move into a section of the place that's called NU1, which is kind of short for “native unit one,” which is like this is the first unit for natives, and then it's divided in that way. Later, in the 90s, they will change the NU designation to zones. And I don't know it yet, but like zones will later appear as different social engineering in my novel, like three decades later.

So, but the township itself was also part of what was then called a Bantustan or a homeland. And these were supposed to be independent black states, but actually were, they were dummy states, they didn't actually have a real functioning economy. They had leaders that had been propped up by white South Africa, and more or less kind of functioned as a labor reserve. They had a strong civil servant class, but that class was also indirectly or directly in service to the apartheid regime, you

know, depending on, you know, whoever's level of collaboration. And these were also divided according to ethnicities, you know, that exist within the population already, so that they could also like mitigate the idea of like a unified native or black population. And so later, I will come to understand that as like an instrument from this white supremacist scientific government, you know, a tool of conquest, technology of conquest.

However, when I'm growing up in Bisho, the capital of the Ciskei, I'm growing up with a single mom, she has to go out and work. And most of the time she is kind of like, I mean, she can get help sometimes, sometimes she can't and she has to kind of leave me at home by myself. That's what I think, in the States, is it referred to as a latchkey kid.

MAT

Yes, yes.

MN

[Laughing] So this is when I also kind of developed this fascination of like, first watching TV. I then also just really, really being fascinated by animation as well. And then at some point, my mom, actually before that point, the programming, because we only really got television, like in the 70s. And so everyone was buying up these old shows or the broadcasting corporation back then, they're buying up these old shows. And a lot of interesting stuff, you know, kind of like snuck through there. There was anime, there was a whole host of kind of like themed like science fiction stuff that I just kind of gravitated towards. And this is just before the time then that at some point, my mom comes home and she's got like this bootleg Nintendo for me as a gift, which were really quite popular back then. This was like the early 90s. So it was not necessarily Nintendo, it was a bootleg of a Famicom.

MAT

A Nintendo compatible device.

MN

Exactly, exactly.

So these are like some of my earlier experiences with narrative. But for the most part, they didn't really get into my literary development. They were just a memory from the time where I once hosted my imagination and I felt safe and happy and, while outside actually. So this is during the period of transition now. So between ‘86 and ‘94, there's a lot of violence in the area because the Liberation Party, the Resistance Party is agitating for the dissolution of the homelands. And the apartheid government is also becoming more aggressive. So we grew up with this sense of dread and this sense of fear. Our parents are always telling us not to play in the streets. And so the idea was to engage this child as much as they could so that they could remain indoors. And so there was that contrast of this violence outside and then this imaginative world that I was completely involved by through these various mediums.

And I hadn't really made the connection for a long time. I would go on to university and kind of study the English canon and then study African literature, but not really make the connection until much later. And which, as Magalí says, is there from like my really early work, but really kind of finds an

explicit expression in *Triangulum*. And the reason for that actually was reflecting on having always wanted to write about how eerie living in a homeland was through history and history books. I mean, I'd known the facts, I'd had the knowledge, but this now became something, this room, something that I felt I had experienced as a child under that occupation and continues to be present. This intersection between technology, either as an instrument of altruism or conquest. And when it's about conquest, who's usually at the top and who's usually marching along with us?

EH

Well, I thought this might be a good time for me to jump in because I did have a question about technology and the kind of devastating critique of the digital information economy, or like our very contemporary economy that appears in *Triangulum*. The protagonist of that book works at a tech startup at some time in the future, I think, and she's mining data, she's testing algorithms, she's working on this stuff. There are analogies between the history of gold mining in South Africa and then the data mining that she's doing in this future moment. So already history and speculative futurity are there in the same exact details in your novel.

But there's a point where she gets called into a special inner sanctum at the tech startup and a very sinister manager starts to explain their program, like what they're trying to do. And he says something like, in simple terms, we were teaching machines how to think and consume like the poor. So this is futuristic, but terrifyingly believable. And then it turns out that the company is using like implants and special contact lenses and trackers to record data on unresisting, but certainly not consenting adults from the townships. And they're trying, there's all this language in your novel about they're trying to understand and decode human desire and turn it into an algorithm and, you know, mine it, the better to control the population and to sell them things.

And as I was reading this like really horrible manager's, you know, super corporate language description of this plan, I couldn't help but thinking, isn't that kind of what a novelist does? So you want to get inside a character's head, you want to see what they see, you want to track what they desire and kind of know it from the inside. So I guess my question, which again is a question that we've been, you've been talking about for a while now, which is the kind of eerie analogies between history and futurity and technology. My question is something like, I don't know, do you think of the novel itself as extractive in some sense? What is the role of information itself in the novel for you?

MN

Oh, yeah, that's a great question. I would say to some degree, you know, it is something that is an artifact that observes. And to some degree, I would agree, perhaps a little extracts, but with my, in my experience at least, when I actually embark on writing a book or at least when I'm drafting it for the first time, I often begin, perhaps maybe yes, having a very general idea of the subject matter. And then a character. But I don't know it yet, but the character kind of predates whatever I'm trying to write about, that's imaginative and plot based. And it's more about kind of a sensibility, a way of feeling. If perhaps I actually want to write about a character who's alienated, because I can relate to having had feelings of being alienated as well, I can start them off a certain way. And I know, you know, thinking is split between us, but in my experience, usually the book doesn't actually work until I step away from the role of being someone who is trying to do mining. It only really comes to life when I allow it to challenge me.

Sometimes you do worry, you know, if a particular vision is kind of dark, and what you're generating, and kind of bringing into the world, you don't, you want it to remain on the side of like a contemplation and possibly like a warning, and not a, I wouldn't say endorsement, but also like not something that you're saying we're resigned to experiencing, you know.

EH

I think that sounds exactly right to me. Thinking about the role of technology in your novels, that it's not, and your story you just told about growing up with like, you know, off-brand Nintendo and stuff. You know, technology can be the technology of conquest, and you're very alert to that, but it can also be the technology of, as you said, like contemplation or warning. And you balance those two across all your work, actually, in a really interesting way.

MN

No, thank you, thank you. And also, I think it can also kind of be wrested sometimes from, and kind of hacked in a way. Like I always have these fond memories of never, ever having grown up with a full Lego set. It was always like just a bunch in a bucket, like different pieces just thrown into a bucket. And, but some of the structures that I could see, some of the, you know, kids who played with these things were just like incredible, you know, and they had no instruction manuals. So it's also this idea that, you know, with a different vantage point, with the different positionality as well, in the hands of different people, you know, even marginalized people, technology can also take on a form, that can be surprising, and perhaps even beneficial.

MAT

We keep coming back to both your experiences as a young person, and both novels have such an interest in young people. And I'm using young a little loosely, right?

MN

Yeah, sure.

MAT

We're talking sort of teenagers into sort of young adulthood, beginning university years, which right, is a kind of moment also of transition and then post 1994, the beginning of Democratic South Africa, right, and an alliance in *Triangulum* in terms of the biography of the narrator. But I'm, the thing that I was interested in was, I mean, the respect for young people, the curiosity about the sort of internal lives of young people that isn't sensational, that's very curious about how they're engaging with and decoding the world, but also the dynamics between young people, because both novels have these groups of three characters that have very strong and intimate bonds, that really, I mean, the energy of those bonds, right, it's potentially explosive, it moves the plot forward in the case of both novels. And it creates an interesting contrast with the kind of loneliness of your protagonist narrators in both cases, who are often respectively talking about this moment of intense bondedness, and then in that kind of future moment, reflecting on their sort of isolation, loneliness, I mean, none of these words feels entirely precise. But, so, I was just thinking about it structurally, right, and I think that's limiting in terms of how the conversation has been unfolding.

So I wanted to ask, what is it about these groups of three friends, although maybe not necessarily three friends, but the groups of friends of young people that make them so narratively compelling for you?

MN

I think, besides the intuitive, I think what draws me to it really is having these characters who are still young, who are still kind of forming, you know, their vision of the world and their vision of society and their communities, but in their own ways, don't fit in with their respective communities. So it's kind of like they have been given these groupings to inherit, but they don't actually feel at home with them, their particular in groups. And so they kind of self-exile and create a new kind of tribe, micro-tribe between them. And this micro-tribe allows them to kind of experiment, you know, in how, in forming the world that's in front of them and how they perceive it, and, you know, to interchange it. And I think I had a very strong interest in that because, partly I did not want to kind of write a South Africa or a perception of South Africa that I had read before. And that's just not for the sake of originality. It was more for like one that I had actually experienced. And one in which I could extend from as well.

Because I mean, my character's experiences and mine are, you know, different, of course, but there are certain touch points. And I just have this interest in them coming together and there's an idea of what South Africa is. And then there's this thing that they create, you know, which kind of recasts it in the new light. That's compelling for me as a writer. And I also hope compelling for readers as well. That's one thing.

And then secondly, I think, you know, as much as novels or books in general can be, you know, these instruments of, carriers of information, whether generated of mind, or like, you know, technologies of knowledge production. They also, literature also has this remarkable, almost miraculous ability to distill human experience. And one of the things that are really important about human experience to me is this intimacy. And I think what's really alluring about the intimacy between young people, when there's a trust between them, it's almost kind of like it's free falling. It's not as rhetorical or discursive or, you know, psychologically complex, you know, they fall into it.

And I think that thing, you know, is such an important part of being a human being. And it's always like what I'm trying to capture with depicting human beings in writing. So it's, it's never really truly just about the ideas. It's also about, you know, as, you know, as a technology as well, which is very complex technology that we haven't found a way to replicate exactly, despite our best attempts.

MAT

I mean, you know, the word that's circling here is the queerness of those bonds, not because of any kind of sexual component, actually, but precisely because they're not falling into the established patterns. And they're sort of unfolding in any possible way as sort of desire dictates rather than seeking to match a certain, certain kinds of coupling, certainly, but also just certain ways of being in the world. There's that openness to possibility that sort of exceeds any kind of code that seems to be what's so interesting for you there.

MN

Yeah, I love that. And I think when I was working on them, it just felt like the most natural thing really, especially for these characters who are kind of forming their own world. So because I mean, if we go back to the analogy of like, as kind of like being pieces of hardware and our consciousness, perhaps, is the operating system. And so what happens when you don't actually have all of these other influences that are kind of coding it a particular way, and you're just kind of going with how you feel instinctively with who you draw to, how you love, how you think, you know, and without kind of second guessing that either, because you're so removed from the people who would actually say no, your system needs to work this way.

And I think it's just something extremely hopeful about that. And, you know, and obviously, it kind of when you mentioned queerness, I mean it's something that exists in the society and explicitly puts us in proximity with the technology of them, you know. And so yeah, thank you for that.

EH

That's one of the best descriptions of being a teenager, I think I've ever heard: as yet uncoded.

MN

Exactly.

EH

And resistant to all code too.

MN

Yes, yes. And I think, if I look back at it, yeah, I mean, I look around in South Africa in particular, there's so much progressive drive in terms of young people, like perennially, they're always kind of pushing the society forward. And I think it's because of large parts of that resistance, you know, the past, there is hardly ever any nostalgia for the past so instead people are able to see its restrictions. And so acknowledge them, but also kind of like not embrace them fully. And that leaves kind of an openness, you know, socially. And as such, you know, the society is always changing in that way. And I love to think that, you know, our literature should be something that matches that.

EH

That seems to me like an excellent place to close.

At Novel Dialogue, we always end with a signature question. So something that we're asking across all of the guests on this season. So for season seven, this is the question, what is the first book that you remember just loving?

MN

It's since grown to become something else, but the book for me, and I remember staying up reading it in my first year of boarding school, and kind of having to finish the book, even after lights out, by moonlight, actually. And that was the first Dark Tower novel, *The Gunslinger* by Stephen King. This is before he had written all the other volumes. And in fact, it was just kind of like this complete thing. Or at least I thought so. And I just remember, like, just being completely mesmerized, because I couldn't understand, was this a Western? Was this like science fiction? Was it like realism? And

also, it just felt illegal for me to be reading at that age. So, yeah, and I just loved it. I mean, it ended on a cliffhanger, but I didn't really care. I adored the book and what it was doing. And I loved the mix of genres, and I loved the grittiness as well.

EH

That's fantastic. Even back then, you were thinking about transgressing genres and breaking down those borders.

MN

Yeah, and it was a ton of fun, completely transported. So I'm glad it touched the part of me that could be that. And then later on, I could think about it.

MAT

I think I suspect that for a lot of us, Stephen King has a sort of little moment in our biography as readers, and in some cases writers as well, the kind of international explosion of engaging with that work, usually when you're a little bit too young, right? It's usually sort of early exposure, and that it is truly global. I'm saying it, he, Stephen King, is truly global in reach in that way, usually encountered by young readers who don't yet have the kind of mechanisms of discernment that we're meant to have. And can just explode open your brain in really exciting ways.

MN

Absolutely. And now that I think of it, the character Roland is also in search of a mysterious, large, black structure.

EH

It's the machine from *Triangulum*, right there.

Now that we've given a generation of scholars something to write about with your novel and unpacked it, it's time to bring this conversation to a close. So as always, we are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship and to *Public Books* for its partnership, and to Duke University for its continued support. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern, Rebecca Otto is our social media manager, and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out past episodes featuring Ocean Vuong, Lauren Groff, Jeff VanderMeer, and many more. And if you liked what you heard, please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.

Thank you, Masande and Magalí, for a really thoughtful and technological conversation.

MN

Thank you so much.

MAT

Thank you, Masande. Thank you, Emily. This is always, always a joy.