10.4 Place presents itself to you in fragments: Ivan Vladislavić and Jeanne-Marie Jackson (MAT)

Transcript

Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra

Hello, and welcome to *Novel Dialogue*, a podcast that brings together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work, and about how we work in relation to novels. We're sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies, and produced in partnership with *Public Books*, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, one of your hosts for this season. For today's episode, we're thrilled to have with us Ivan Vladislavić, the South African novelist, essayist, and editor, in conversation with Jeanne-Marie Jackson. Celebrated by Katie Kitamura as one of the most significant writers working in English today, Ivan is a razor-sharp chronicler of contemporary South Africa. His work includes the novels *The Folly*, *The Restless Supermarket*, *Double Negative*, and from 2019, *The Distance*, as well as collections of short stories and a series of collaborations and experiments with the interplay of fiction and nonfiction. *Double Negative* was composed as part of a collaboration with the photographer David Goldblatt, while *Portrait with Keys*, from 2006, and most recently, *The Near North*, published in 2024, combined reportage and impressionistic vignettes to narrate Johannesburg as a city in transformation. Ivan is also a distinguished professor in creative writing at Wits University in Johannesburg, and, I'll add, has many fans amongst the *Novel Dialogue* team. Our Slack lit up with delight at the news that he would be appearing on the podcast. Jeanne-Marie, for her part, is a driving force in African literary studies and herself a delight. Her books include *South African Literature's Russian Soul: Narrative Forms of Global Isolation*, *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing*, and, most recently, *The Letter of the Law in J.E. Casely Hayford's West Africa*, published earlier this year. Her work has also appeared in a range of academic and public-facing venues, including *The New York Times*, *n+1*, and, of course, *Public Books*. She's a professor of English at Johns Hopkins University, and currently director of Hopkins' Alexander Grass Humanities Institute. Now, before handing things over to Jeanne-Marie and Ivan, I'm going to add that, given the scope of Ivan's work, we've chosen three points of reference as coordinates for our conversation today. The novel, *The Folly*, from 1993, and *Double Negative*, from 2010, and *The Near North*, from 2024. Welcome to *Novel Dialogue*, Ivan and Jeanne-Marie.

Jeanne-Marie Jackson

Thank you so much, Magalí, and thank you, Ivan, for being part of this with us.

Ivan Vladislavić

Thank you for the invitation. I'm delighted to be here.

JMJ

Well, I was hoping we could start pretty broadly for the benefit of readers who maybe haven't had the experience of reading your work yet. And I wanted to ask you, what defines Johannesburg for you as a literary city? And I'm thinking especially of one line that I love from *Double Negative*, which is that “the poetry of the moment made me long for the prose of Johannesburg.” I completely relate to that. Johannesburg is a city, I have to say, that personally took me many, many years to warm up to, and now I love it. But I don't think it's a city that strikes everyone immediately as having an especially literary character. [laughter] So I wanted to ask you why it lacks poetry specifically, first of all. And as a sort of follow-up, a little mini-question to that, how the city has, across your career, facilitated, or maybe better to say demanded, such an easy blurring of different kinds of prose? So: fiction, memoir, roman, a clef, reportage, as Magalí mentioned.

IV

Right. Thanks for the question. Johannesburg is famously unlovable. A lot of people dislike the city. A lot of people think it's very ugly. It's a place that doesn't open itself to newcomers and visitors easily in terms of understanding how it works, although it's very welcoming to outsiders, I think, on the whole.

JMJ

Yeah.

IV

It's a city that was really founded for quite pragmatic purposes. It had an economic genesis to dig gold out of the ground. And so people who've come here have generally come to work. It's a working place. It's not a place that people come to relax. And I think I came to Johannesburg escaping from Pretoria, which is nearby, 60 kilometers away. I grew up there. I came to Johannesburg as a student because Johannesburg was a big city and an exciting city. And a somewhat dangerous place in some ways, if you grew up where I did. And I think that was some of the initial appeal, was getting to what qualified as a big city. And I think over the years, becoming familiar with the place, you discover its secrets to a certain extent. And you find your way around. And that makes you feel comfortable. And then almost inevitably, the city will slap you down and tell you not to get too big for your boots. And you discover that you don't know it that well. And I think for a writer, it's a very changeable city. It's been through massive changes in the 50 odd years that I've lived here. The city has passed through such enormous changes that it feels in many ways like an entirely different place. And I think that's a challenging situation for a writer. Because your materials are changing as you're working with them. That insider knowledge that a lot of writers feed off escapes you constantly, kind of slips through your

fingers. And so you have to work especially hard to keep up, to try and understand the place. And I think that challenge is part of what has made this a literary city, getting to grips with it, getting under the obvious surface of things, and trying to figure out what makes it tick.

JMJ

I wonder if you could also take a stab at connecting this to your emphasis throughout your career on getting lost. Again, especially going back to *Double Negative* and the game that the main character, you know, kind of loosely autobiographical, I take it, would play with his father of lying down in the backseat of the old Benz, I think it was, and trying to figure out where you were in the city just by feel. But then also, as you take your work into its current iteration, or most recent iteration in *The Near North,* trying to refract Johannesburg through tech, and Google Street View, and using Google Maps, and the difficulty of continuing to be able to get lost. As it's mapped in these new ways. How is lostness itself essential to Johannesburg's literary character or texture for you?

IV

Well, it was certainly a way in which I discovered the city when I first came here, and I began walking. One of my strategies for getting to know Johannesburg was to open the book of maps at random and find a place to go to, and just head out there and walk around and see what was there. And I think this is echoed in a way in *Double Negative* by the game that Auerbach plays from up on the hill, when he randomly selects houses from looking down on the suburb, randomly selects houses to go to. And the idea is that everywhere is interesting if you look properly, if you look carefully enough. And so there was something of that, and I guess it's like something of Georges Perec's approach to things in this game of just, you know, throwing a dart at the map and then saying, go there and see what's there. And so that was partly how I discovered the city was literally getting lost, going to a place where I didn't know my way around. And as you say, it was easier to get lost, you know, a few years ago before we had phones in our hands and GPS to guide us every step of the way. It's quite difficult now to find yourself really disoriented in that way. You have to make a conscious effort to leave the technology behind. Of course, it's also become rather risky to just go anywhere in Johannesburg and walk around. So the knowledge of places and knowing where you're going has become a little bit more pressing as the city has become a rather risky place to walk around for most people. But I like the idea of somehow handing over the control to the city in a way by being in a place that's unfamiliar and seeing what it delivers. You know, you remind me now, speaking of the subject, you remind me of Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*.

JMJ

Of course, yeah.

IV

It ties in quite nicely because in the sense that the big mark of orientation in Cape Town would be the mountain. And this notion that you can't avoid it wherever you are, you will always be able to see the mountain, the most obvious feature of the landscape. Of course, it's not entirely true. But that sense of not being able to get lost because the landscape is so imposing, because it's so visible all the time.

JMJ

I'm so curious, reading especially *The Near North* and your slightly prolonged autobiographical reflections, I think, in comparison to previous work of yours. Whether the idea of a Gauteng novel or a Gauteng narrative has any traction for you.

IV

I don't—I would say if I can take a step back, I'm not sure that Johannesburg enables that project either. Because I think the notion of the quintessential Johannesburg book might be quite a tricky one. There are so many Johannesburgs.

JMJ

Well, they're yours.

IV

Well, thank you. [laughter] But there are so many versions of the city and people do live in the city in such different ways. But I think there's a growing shelf of books about the city, that's for sure. Quite an impressive library of books by now, considering that it's not a very old city. There's been a lot written from, you know, social histories and novels and books on the architecture and so on. But when you put them all together, you get a wonderful picture of the city. But I think that on the whole, Johannesburg is a place that you look on through a particular window. And capturing it whole is quite difficult, I think, for any one writer. I'm very glad if you think that I get some way there. The idea of a Gauteng novel, you know, Gauteng is a relatively new construct. The provincial structure of nine provinces only really came into existence with the new South Africa. When the four old provinces were reorganized, demarcated into nine provinces. And I'll be frank and say that I don't have a particularly strong sense of living in Gauteng. Yeah. And I've kind of—I wouldn't say I've held onto the notion that I'm in the Transvaal, because that's very much in the past. It's a very much a construct of the old South Africa, which I long ago put behind me. When I grew up as a child, the Transvaal was a strong entity for me. Being a Transvaaler had some meaning to me. With the planning of the remapping of the country into nine provinces, and I became a Gautenger, I have some kind of sense of belonging to this part of the world. But I don't have a very strong sense of Gauteng as an entity. Yeah. So I'm not really sure.

MAT

I wanted to jump in with a question actually along these lines, and maybe a bit of a provocation. So what I find so interesting about this discussion about writing place is that it seems like the great subject is actually the non-fixity of place, whether we're talking about Johannesburg as a city, or also just the changing topography of South Africa, right? That it's one thing before 1994 and a very different thing after 1994. And so with the proposition, the great subject is actually the transformation of the landscape and the city out from under you to some extent, that whether through fiction, non-fiction, and I think also photography, right, that these things that seem to promise a fixing into something that could be the great novel of a city, the city seems to keep escaping. And so time and the ordering of time becomes the challenge for narrativizing that.

IV

I think the city, in a way, and perhaps the country, to take an even larger view, cannot be grasped whole. It has to be grasped in pieces or in fragments. And I think that was my thinking behind the structure of *Double Negative* was to kind of take cross sections through time, rather than write a continuous chronological linear novel that, you know, just unfolded in some neat way. To actually take three cross sections through time, with big gaps in between. And then the challenge was to try and pick up the narrative in each successive section and somehow bring the past into the present without overloading each section of the book. So I think that, in a way, although you’re right that the book is more linear, it also proceeds by a kind of the rubbing together of pieces, right, the clashing of pieces. And it's in the big holes in between that I think that some of the interests of the book might lie. And maybe that's not that different to *The Near North*, where, in fact, you have kind of these two bookends, which are creating some suggestion of a linear progression from lockdown one to lockdown two. And then in between, you shift back into the past, but really what's happening is a whole lot of observations, which are in fact drawn from across that whole span of time, but are woven into a particular moment. So I think that perhaps the structuring devices underneath it all are rather similar. But the key thing is this notion that the place presents itself to you in fragments and pieces, that it's not a willful imposition that the material requires that kind of treatment. I mean, I know that a lot of my work looks fragmentary, but I think it looks like that because I really am trying to respond to the material which feels that way.

JMJ

I want to go from this big, broad subject of Johannesburg as a literary city, Johannesburg as a literary topography, and all that we've been speaking about, to a much more zoomed in question about a technique that I noticed this time around reading through *The Folly*, your very first novel, which I hadn't read in quite a few years. I think I taught it about five years ago, most recently, so it was a real treat to me, to go back to it, and took on new resonance in my own understanding of your work, put in conversation with *The Near North* in particular. You mentioned already Georges Perec. And one of the ways that you introduce him into *The Near North* is through discussion of what you call the inventory form, and his work as a documentarian specifically. I

had been taking notes already to that point on lists, and all of the recurrence of lists, in *The Folly* especially, but then I started to think that it was one of your hallmark, or kind of trademark devices, and that your discussion of Georges Perec was something like what the Russian formalists would call a laying bare of the device, or in Russian, right, you're declaring this thing that you do because you actually want to disclose it to your readers. So, I went back, and if you don't mind, I marked a couple of the lists, or inventories in *The Folly*, that I thought I could just share briefly with our listeners, and then get you to speak a little bit about what they do for you. And also, how your use of inventories or lists may have evolved over this long haul of your career going back to 1993, right, all the way up to 2024. And there are so many of these, there's another one that I marked on page 91 of the archipelago edition of *The Folly*:

Boot, camouflage, combat. Chopper, Soviet-made, collapsible. Traditional weapon: assegai, knopkierie, panga, pike, pole, stick, stone, brick, mortar-board, fountain-pen, paper-clip, rubber stamp, gavel, sickle, spade, rake, hoe, spoke, knitting-needle, crochet-hook, darning-egg, butter-knife, runcible spoon, pot, pan, gravy-boat, whisk.

And I could go on from there, I will not, obviously. But it's something that you do a lot. Something that you are evidently intrigued by in this laying bare of the device with that that you introduce in *The Near North*. And I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about why.

IV

Well, I think you're right that it is a striking quality of the writing. It struck me as well, looking over, looking over the work, which I have to do occasionally, as I had to do for our discussion, go back to things I haven't looked at for a long time. And I glanced over *The Folly* yesterday, and I was actually struck by the same thing, strangely enough. And it's a quality I've recognized before, but it also struck me with particular force, looking over the text.

JMJ

Yeah.

IV

And I think that one of the things that it marks in my early work, I think, was play. You know, when one goes, when I go back to my first novel, it's quite strange for me to approach it. I have to approach it as a reader, in a certain way. Because I can't really imagine myself back into the situation of being the writer of that text. So I have to look at it almost as a reader would and say, well, what's that about? And I think the lists in *The Folly* are continuous with the play that goes on through the whole novel. So the whole thing is playful and the whole thing is very aware of the potential for play in language itself. And so I think some of them, some of the lists, serve a kind of stitching together function. They're dropped into the text at moments where I'm trying to get from one point of the point to another. So they have a kind of narrative function, but really I think they are fairly purely exuberant. As when I'm writing them, the function they end up playing

in the text is rather different. I think because the central conceit of the thing is this contrast between the kind of visionary and the pragmatic. So the Nieuwenhuizen character, who has this vision and is a dreamer, and the hardware man, Mr. Hardware, Mr. Malgas, the pragmatic hardware man. In the end, all of these objects, this clutter of things, ends up being the kind of weight of the world in a way. It's Mr. Hardware's stuff that's weighing down everything. Mr. Nieuwenhuizen's objects, which are also inventoried from time to time, are kind of debris. They're quite fragile things that can get swept away quite easily. They're makeshift things. Whereas Mr. Hardware comes with all of these ornaments and bric-a-brac and all of the stuff. And he kind of brings this, this kind of middle-class display cabinet clutter into the novel. And so it ends up being this sort of balance that somehow keeps things weighted. That's what I think that that's one of the functions that plays in the end. But when I'm writing the book, I imagine that I'm just fooling around a lot of the time. I'm just, I'm lapsing into this language, into this listing. I think later on, if I look over my work as a whole, there's more of a documentary impetus later with the listing. So by the time I get to *Portrait with Keys*, it has some aspects of that. And then it's more Perecian in a way. It's about making inventories and lists as a way of grasping something about the world, grasping it in a more or less complete way. So then it becomes a more conceptual kind of a play. It's not just a language thing, it becomes more of a play around a more conceptually based attempt to “exhaust the place” as Perec would put it one time, seize it through the language. And then I suppose in the end, what strikes me—I wrote a short piece about this. I think I actually put it into *The Loss Library*, my book, *The Loss Library*, that the list in a way is always disturbing to the reader. And I imagine that, and it sort of disturbs the writer in the same way. The list is the place where the language fails in a way, where the syntax fails. And then you fall, when you get to a list and suddenly it just disintegrates into a whole lot of possibilities, a big clutter of words. That's the place where the sort of communicative narrative function fails. And so maybe it's also my distrust of linear narrative. Maybe the listing is somehow signaling my distrust of the kind of propulsive linear narrative.

JMJ

I understand that you studied Afrikaans at Wits. You were a double major, I believe, right? In English and Afrikaans literature. Afrikaans is a shared interest. I don't know that it will be apparent to everyone tuning in for this. It's a pretty deep divide in the South African literary landscape, certainly in the academy. You know, the stereotypical version is that you have, as you would call it in *Double Negative*, this kind of wishy-washy liberalism. Right. Of the English language novelists. Often an unfair assignation, I think. And you obviously are taking the piss out of it to some extent when you're bringing it up. And then you have the more radical, more experimental end of the literary life of South Africa in Afrikaans. I think that's something that as a part-time scholar of Afrikaans literature, I often have to explain to people that when you study Afrikaans literature, you are doing in many ways the opposite of studying Afrikaans politics and Afrikaans political history. And in fact, you know, the conservatism and hardline dimensions of Afrikaner political history are what gives birth to the possibility of a real avant-garde. And this kind of deep experimentalism of the literary life of that language. I'm going to throw out a provocation now, which I will then dress up as a question, which is that if I were asked off the cuff to place your work within any kind of cohort or periodicity in South African literature, I think

in your attachment to the guttural, visceral materiality of language in the way that you're constantly playing with kind of literalizing figures and figuratizing very literal, you know, sort of list-y inventory accounts of Johannesburg and of Gauteng. I'd be very hard pressed to give you a real English South African literary genealogy or cohort, to be honest, and I wonder what you make of that and whether you would be open to the idea of kind of locating yourself within an Afrikaans literary genealogy.

IV

Yeah, I mean, I've been asked about my relationship to the Afrikaans writers and to the literature before, but no one has ever suggested that I might be an Afrikaans writer undercover, so to speak. Yeah. So that's a really interesting perspective. I can certainly see why you would say that, and I think some of it is, you know, quite practical reasons why my work for instance might resemble Ingrid Winterbach's early work. So that when I was studying Afrikaans writing in the mid seventies, with John Miles and Ampie Coetzee and Ernst Lindenberg and a couple of other people, the key text I was studying, for instance, was Etienne Leroux.

JMJ

Of course.

IV

It's a very big influence on my work and one that I absolutely acknowledge. Winterbach has a direct relationship with Leroux, right?

JMJ

Mm-hmm.

IV

Winterbach writes—I'm sure you know the story—that as Lettie Viljoen, she enters into correspondence with Etienne Leroux as a young writer and sort of mentors her. And she's always acknowledged Leroux as the main influence on her own literary life. And I think one could trace that sort of set of texts that were formative for me, studying Afrikaans at Wits in the seventies, reading Breytenbach and reading the early Brink and so on. John Miles himself, reading Miles' early novels, and then all the story writers, the dozens of wonderful story writers. I think I fall under the influence of the same set of writers that I think a lot of the writers you're talking about, Marlene, for instance, Marlene van Niekerk is writing from almost the same set of reference points. And then, of course, there's a whole lot of other, I mean—as you well know, influence is a very, very complex thing. But certainly there's an overlap there, which is quite an—it's unusual simply because it wasn't that common, not common at all for an English speaker to study Afrikaans literature.

JMJ

Exactly.

IV

And that's, I mean, it's that simple. I went to university with the notion that I would read a lot of books. That was the main reason I went and I wanted to read novels and read fiction and so on. And so I decided I'll study Afrikaans. I didn't know much about the tradition that you're talking about. The radical experimental tradition was certainly not what I got in my Afrikaans lessons at school. So it was a very big revelation for me, arriving at university and discovering this extraordinary, vital literature. And it also has the effect, which I've spoken about before, that it generates a feeling in me of the immediate power of literature and the importance of it in the moment. Because we're in the Afrikaans department, we're studying writers who are writing right then and there. And we're studying books that are, like, hot off the press, you know, as they come out, we're reading them. And in the English department where I'm also studying, we're still studying the canon and it doesn't go much past the Second World War, you know, if I remember correctly, one elective in my entire English studies on the modern novel, right? In three years of study, and that was, you know, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and so on. But apart from that, you read no contemporary literature. Now, in a sense, I'm not sorry. In fact, I'm not sorry at all that I was made to read the canon. But there was definitely a disconnect between that reading and that literature and the world around me. And so this feeling that you could—there were books that were immediately about your own society and that had an urgent connection to what was happening in the world around you. That was really very exciting. And so it's undoubtedly had a huge influence on my own direction as a writer. The other thing that's maybe an interesting way of looking at it is that the English writing that was appealing, that did appeal to me in those years, is the early American postmodernists. So at the same time as I'm studying in the Afrikaans department, I was also reading for my own pleasure, you know, Vonnegut and, and Donald Barthelme and these people. And they felt much more connected to the Afrikaans literature I was reading than they did to the English tradition, which is, which is large, largely, well, it's largely realist in South Africa. But there are exceptions, and I think that's also been flattened out to some extent. So the experimental strand in Gordimer, for instance, is quite conveniently ignored when people take Gordimer as the sort of great example of this realist tradition. Actually, there's a lot of experimentation in her work too. Not to flatten it out. But on the whole, the writers that I was reading, if I'm casting my mind back now, the English writers that I was reading, the British writers I was reading, say, Kingsley Amis, or John Wain, or those kinds of writers, the angry young men crew, who I was reading at the same time as the early American postmodernists, they feel much more like they're part of an old tradition. So the more exciting experimental American fiction also meshes with that experimental Afrikaans work, which I think comes, in fact, largely out of European, out of Dutch and French experimental writing rather than out of the American tradition. But for me, as a reader, as a young reader and writer, there's a meshing of the two.

MAT

So as we're coming to the end of this conversation, it's my turn to ask the signature question, which is a question that we ask all of our guests in a given season of *Novel Dialogue*. And this season's signature question is for Ivan, who is your favorite teacher?

IV

Well, I've had some very wonderful teachers, including university lecturers, but I've acknowledged many of them in one way or another. So I thought I would actually mention my high school English teacher, who was a man called Gavin Wilmot. And he came to our school as a teaching student. So he did his practical work as part of his teaching degree. He came to our school and taught our class. And then he came back a year or two later as a qualified teacher and became my class teacher. So he was very young and he was a sort of, um—he was an Anglophile, pipe smoking, tweed-jacket-wearing kind of person. And he was an enormous influence, I think, on the course of my life in some ways. He was a very witty teacher, loved engaging with the pupils, kind of swapping puns, joking around and so on. But there were two key things that I think really had a lasting impact on me. And one was that he introduced us to all kinds of things outside of the syllabus. And what was actually a very confining syllabus. I'm talking about the early seventies when the school Christian national education curriculum was very constrained. And so he had a particular love for a certain kind of English humor. So he introduced us to things like, um, *The Goon Show*. He had recordings of *The Goon Show*, which was Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers, BBC radio comedy. Very surreal, very wacky comedy for its day. He used to bring a portable record player into the classroom and play us things on record, right? And he played us *The Goon Show*. He played us things like Gilbert and Sullivan, that I would never have come across in the ordinary course of my life. He also played us those extraordinary recordings that Dylan Thomas did of his own reading, his own work. And the incredible thing, which has never left me is—the recording was, I think it's called *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, which Dylan Thomas did on BBC radio, I think. So he, yeah, he brought these things into our lives, which we would never otherwise have come across. He was also a passionate fan of *MAD Magazine*. And that was a very strange thing for a teacher to be, because we were always being sort of ushered away from comics of any kind. And he loved *MAD Magazine*, and he loved it especially for the movie parodies that *MAD* used to run, and he always encouraged us to read those. So that was the one side of it, and there are a lot of other things like that, that I could mention. But the other thing is that he introduced this idea of the writer's notebook into our class. And I must have been about maybe 13 or so, I think I was in Standard 7, so just into high school. And at the beginning of the year, he dished out the exercise books and said, this is a writer's notebook, and you can write anything you like in here. And it won't be graded, it won't be marked, it's not part of the syllabus, but I will read it. Whatever you write in there, I will read and tell you what I think. And, you know, I don't think there were too many takers. I can't imagine that too many of my peers were enthusiastically taking their notebooks home to write compositions that they didn't need to write. But I was really, you know, wanting to write, and so it was an absolute godsend. So I began writing in the writer's notebook, and he would read it and give me commentary on that, and it was just between the two of us.

And it became a lifelong habit, the habit of keeping notebooks, which is very much part of my writing practice, goes back to that moment of someone saying, what is a writer's notebook? Well, it's just the thing where you write anything down. I remember going to him and saying, what should I put in here? And he said, anything you like. You can write anything you like in here. And that was kind of a really transformative thing for me. And as I said, it's still something that I do today.

MAT

At the conclusion of another *Novel Dialogue* episode, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, *Public Books* for its partnership, and the Ric Edelman College of Communication, Humanities & Social Sciences at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern, and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out recent episodes of the podcast with Lauren Beukes, Masande Ntshanga, Teju Cole, and Katie Kitamura. And if you liked what you've heard, please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us here at *Novel Dialogue*, thank you for listening, and thank you, Ivan and Jeanne-Marie, for a wonderful conversation.