Novel Dialogue 8.6 “I love a dialectical reader, and best is a dialectical reader who cries”: Jordy Rosenberg and Annie McClanahan (RB)

Transcript

Rebecca Ballard

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 Rebecca Ballard, one of the hosts at *Novel Dialogue*. This podcast brings together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work and how we work in relation to novels, how we read, write, translate, and remember them. Today, we're lucky enough to have Jordy Rosenberg joining us. Jordy is the author of the 2018 novel *Confessions of the Fox* and the forthcoming hybrid work *NIGHT NIGHT FAWN*, both from Random House One World, as well as a scholarly monograph about 18th century religious enthusiasts. *Confessions of the Fox* was a New York Times Editor's Choice selection, shortlisted for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award, and a *New Yorker*, *Huffington Post*, and *Kirkus* Book of the Year, among many other accolades. Jordy serves on the executive board of his faculty union, works with his chapter of Faculty for Justice in Palestine, he's a professor in the Department of English and associated MFA faculty in the Program for Poets and Writers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. And I'll say briefly that *Confessions of the Fox* is the kind of novel whose reviews speak not only to its rich archive, its feats of linguistic and narrative craft, and its sly utopianism, but also to the fact that it's just a delight. *The New York Times* hastens to tell us that while Jordy is a professor, he is also very funny. That's a direct quote. Welcome to the show, Jordy. We're so glad to have you with us.

Jordy Rosenberg

Rebecca, thank you for having me. I really love this podcast, and I have listened, I think, to almost every one.

RB

I will say this was one of the most rewarding invitations to send and see accepted because it's rare that you find out someone is a fan of the podcast the whole time. That's the dream. That's the delight.

JR

Well, that's me. [laughter]

RB

Today, Jordy will be in conversation with Annie McClanahan, who is an associate professor of English at University of California, Irvine, where she's also the faculty co-director of UCI's Prison Education Program at Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility. She works in Marxist feminist political economy, cultural studies, and critical university studies, and teaches classes on 18th and 21st century literature and culture, making her really an ideal interlocutor today. Annie is the author of *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture*, and of the forthcoming *Beneath the Wage: Tips, Tasks, and Gigs in the Age of Service Work*. So welcome to both of you. Thank you so much for being here today.

Annie McClanahan

Thank you so much, Rebecca. I'm really, really excited to be in dialogue with Jordy today.

RB

Well, with that, I'll turn things over to you to begin the conversation.

AM

So Jordy knows already that I am a tremendous fan, both of the novel and of his other work. I want to start by noting, as Rebecca said, that I am in this sort of funny position, which is that most people know me in terms of my scholarship as a 21st century scholar, but I sort of interlope in the 18th century, partly due to one of those weird features of where you're at a campus visit for a job and they say, oh, you are interested in the rise of capitalism and the rise of the novel, would you ever want to teach an 18th century survey? And of course you say yes. And then they actually hold you to it when you get there. And so because of that, I have pretty regularly, almost every year, taught the 18th century survey here at UCI for the last seven years. One of the things that I do just to insist on my own kind of unruly 21st century approach to the 18th century is that I almost always end the class by teaching *Confessions of the Fox*. So I end the class with a 21st century novel about the 18th century. And so I want to just start by asking Jordy a version of the question that I sort of prompt my students with when we get to this novel, which is that what I usually say is: I want you to read this novel and think about how it reads differently to you because you've read all of the other novels that we've read together in this class and you've learned the history that we've learned together in this class. So I want to just begin by asking Jordy, inviting you to say a little bit about how you see *Confessions* in relation to the 18th century novel or to 18th century history. What texts is it in conversation with? What texts is it talking back to? I'm just interested to hear a little bit about how you are thinking about it as a part of that literary genealogy.

JR

I mean, I think one thing to say is that this novel came much more out of a set of historical questions, both about the 18th century and about the present, than it did really from a relationship to the 18th century novel itself. So I guess I'll talk about the historical questions that kind of inspired it. I was in an archive because I had gotten an archival fellowship at UCLA and I was supposed to be finishing my monograph. And I guess I kind of did, and then I just started poking around and I went in thinking that I was going to do maybe another monograph on the history of death penalty law, but this was an incredibly depressing project. And I was not getting anywhere with it. I was really spinning in circles with these fake debates that bourgeois people were having about capital punishment. And then I read Peter Linebaugh's book, *The London Hanged*, which is one of the best book books, just books of any books that I have ever read. And it just, it broke everything open. And in that way, you know, where like a Marxist can just completely shatter this presumption that you have this totally common, so-called commonsense presumption. And what *The London Hanged* did for me was, first of all, it's just a beautiful book. And he begins with a chapter on Jack Sheppard, who ultimately became like the protagonist of this novel. Jack Sheppard was the most famous prison break artist of the 18th century, but also at one time, the most famous person in the early 18th century. That's how much people loved prison break artists. And reading Linebaugh there's, I don't even think it's one of the main points that he was making in his chapter on Sheppard, but he's talking about Sheppard, is doing all these petty crimes. I mean, you know, you could get a charge of capital punishment for stealing minor pieces of property, like a spoon. He's charting all of Sheppard's amazing thefts, and then prison breaks, and breaking his girlfriend out of prison, and it's very amazing. But then he talks about Sheppard's execution, because he was ultimately executed. And he's setting the scene for this public execution at Tyburn. He's talking about the composition of the crowd, and the way in which people would attend these executions, ordinary people, with certain interests in mind. There was a struggle going on, because they had just passed a series of laws where executed prisoners would become the property of surgeons to dissect publicly in ways that were supposed to be an extra threat of punishment. So, there were comrades that would be there to prevent, in the hopes of stealing the body to prevent it from being dissected, just to bury someone. And all of this went against the kind of common wisdom in bourgeois 18th century studies that mobs came to executions because they loved, they loved to see the spectacle, they loved to see people die, ordinary people die, and they loved to jeer at the prisoner. Linebaugh kind of corrected that history. It totally broke open (A) these bourgeois kind of takes on the death penalty, but it also kind of set a scene for me, which is this idea that—it became novelistic, because I started thinking about this crowd composition, where you have different people with maybe the same general aim, which is to say, rescue the incarcerated in some way, but with different… they have the same interests, but different tactics. To me, that felt like a novel. And so it was a conflict with the state, but also conflicts amongst allies. And that really just kind of fascinated me. He also is overturning, say, I'm sure you've read like John Bender's *Imagining the Penitentiary*, right? And there's that whole tradition of this Foucauldian analysis of what the novel is in this period, right? And Bender makes what feels like an airtight, but really is a suffocatingly airtight argument about the novel, where he's like, the novel and the penitentiary are kind of feeding each other and they're a kind of twinned imaginary, where the sentence that develops under prison reform throughout the 18th century, where you get, instead of sort of

immediacy of capital punishment or debtor's prison, this idea that you can morally reform a prisoner through duration, through being alone in a cell and this period of duration known as a sentence. And Bender's basically like, a novel is also a durational experience in which people change. And it's kind of felt so inarguable; it's such a tight argument. But then Linebaugh just comes in and he's like, no, the imaginary of the 18th century is not incarceration. The imaginary is excarceration. And that—it just, I don't know, it just blew my mind. And I wanted to write a novel about it.

AM

I love that answer, not least because I share your just like a deep and abiding love of all of Linebaugh's work, but that book in particular, I mean, yeah, it's the kind of book that just cracks your skull open. It's sort of never the same. And yeah, I mean, there's something about it. Like he so allows and invites comparisons between the past and the present in ways that more traditional historians resist so strongly. And I think, I can really see how that would have been conceptually inspiring for the work that you do in the novel. I actually want to follow up on some of what you were saying, both about the Bender—the tightness, the confinement of the Bender argument and the possibility that gets opened up by Linebaugh reframing as a way of thinking about your relationship to the 18th century novel, like, as a *form*. Because one of the things that I find really fun about teaching the class is, we begin with, we begin with Defoe and we end with Austen and sort of like—yeah, I'm breaking the rules of 18th century by ending with Austen. But again, we actually end with Rosenberg. [laughter] So of the actual 18th century novels, we begin with Defoe, we end with Austen. And I'm sort of like, what you're going to see over the course of this class is this form essentially coalesce. It essentially comes into being and it starts out as sort of pure chaos and it ends as a sort of middle-class propriety. And so I want to ask you a little bit about that because on the one hand, like formally, you know, *Confessions* is, feels very much like a contemporary novel, but it also feels like it's in conversation or dialogue with, if not inheriting a number of 18th century traditions that are also pressing on what we come to take as the novel's key formal features by the time we get into the 19th century. And so in particular, what I was thinking about when you were talking about Linebaugh was that Linebaugh writes a lot in that book also about the picaresque, right? Which feels—which is my favorite sort of pre-“middle-class propriety 18th century” genre certainly feels like part of what is happening at least kind of thematically or conceptually in *Confessions*. But then also there's other genres too, some of which you were evoking before, right? There's crime broadsides, right? There's ballads as the sort of genre that both the carceral and the anti-carceral imaginary take in that period. So yeah, I'm just interested in hearing you say a little bit about their aspects of those other pre- or proto- or anti-novelistic traditions from the period that you were thinking about when you were writing the novel.

JR

The book was much more indebted to 20th and 21st century speculative fiction, formally. Like just before I was working on this, I had put together with Dean Spade a reading group on Samuel Delany's *Nevèrÿon* series. We were going to read every single book because I was like:

I'm never going to read this myself, here's just no way. And somehow we got a bunch of people to do it. You know, *Nevèrÿon*, he will describe as a novel about transition, like the transition from a barter economy to like capitalism. And in a way, actually, you could probably describe the *Nevèrÿon* series as a kind of picaresque. But, anyway, it's this novel that—I mean, it's a series of novels, composed of stories and some of them are taking place actually in an alternate 20th century, so you can see—and some are taking place in like a fictional feudal past. And I think that form was ultimately determinative for my little experiment, which took place in essentially a fictionalized version of the 18th century and a fictionalized version of the 21st. And so that I think was ultimately the overriding formal thing. But, yeah, like obviously I was very taken with the strangeness of 18th century fiction, and maybe it resonated with me. This is just a very, not a theoretical point at all, but I really liked the fact that 18th century, early 18th century novels did not know how to be novels. And neither did I know how to write a novel. So I was like, this is perfect. This is a perfect model for me. [laughter] Like, I don't really have to know how to write characters because neither did they, or dialogue. And you'll note, like, the dialogue's terrible. The characterization is like—and it actually led me off the hook because I knew I had to write a police character, right? Like Jonathan Wild, proto-policeman. And I had a very particular, I still do, but I was younger and I had a different stridency. So I was like, you know, “I will not watch TV shows that have cops on them. They don't have subjectivity. I don't care if they have a psyche or an unconscious, and I'm not giving this character any character depth.” And if I had written a traditional novel that would never fly, but it's an 18th century novel and no characters have character depth. And so I just kind of let myself off the hook.

AM

The students, like they, I mean, the extent to which they cathect to these characters suggests that you may have accidentally written deeper characters than you meant to because they get deeply attached.

RB

I do love that, like, all cops are 18th century flat bastards, though, that's great. That's marvelous. [laughter]

AM

I want to kind of ask about language. And I'm thinking about like the sort of riotous, anarchic, queer language of the dispossessed that the novel not only deploys but is also sort of about and that becomes Jack's entry point into the underworld and becomes an erotic language between him and Bess, as well as a way to sort of build and demonstrate comradeship. And I'm curious, I mean, a part of me is curious about that vis-a-vis, I was thinking about the fact that, like, when Samuel Richardson does the first major rewrite of *Pamela*, the first thing he does is take out all of her working-class language, right? He makes her sound more middle class. And there is something about the novel that wants to always sort of—that tends towards a certain kind of propriety. And that's not—you know, there's something in the way that you're sort of thinking

about 18th century, like, thieves' vernacular. I'm just going to read the shortest possible little moment from it, just so that folks listening have a sense of what I mean. So, this is essentially the first meeting between Jack and Bess. And he says:

"'I was hoping for a bit of a dry bob.'

Jack had not even begun to recover from her face, her scent, her nearness, and most of all, her saying his name.

'Even a dry bob costs too much for a cadger.'

Jack's spirits typhooned into a roiling jubilance. He had always felt that the lexicon of the streets was music, but it wasn't until Bess intoned it that he truly heard it sung.

'Cadger? Certain I'm a screws man.'

That last bit of banter came out clean and strong. Jack grinned.

'A cracksman.'

He cut into his apple with a jackknife, ran his thumb along the gash.

'My dear, I draw latches.'"

And there's just, you know, the sort of question of the language and of the sociolect of the dispossessed and the undercommons seems so important. And it's definitely not something that you find in most 18th century novels. So I'm curious, I mean, partly I'm just curious about where in the archive you found that, the sort of detail of that language, but also what it means for you and for the novel to play with it in the way that you do.

JR

Well, I actually have a critique of myself around the use of that language. I mean, it was really fun to use. And I think this is really, you know, partly can be explained by the fact that I was in an archive when I was writing it, so I had access to these canting dictionaries, which were this publishing phenomenon at the time where there were a number of these dictionaries of thieves and like underworld slang that came out. I kind of did that thing that writers do where you just start taking stuff and using it. But, I wasn't really able to think it through historically, what were these dictionaries doing? Until I read work that came out later, like Sal Nicolazzo's work, which I've talked about before, and I won't go on about because I become insane. I just talk about it forever, which is, it's so good. And Greta LaFleur's work. And I started to think with some degree of shame that probably what these books were doing was, you know, deputizing bourgeois readers and training them in a kind of social forensics, I think, around a general hysteria/excitement around the idea of property crime and sex work. I feel kind of like, uh, did I amplify the wrong voices with that? But, in any case, I guess it gave me language really, but this is kind of a contemporary issue, it gave me language to talk about sex and genitalia and transness in a way that somewhat was using a form of what in sci-fi studies would be described as cognitive estrangement a little bit to kind of get at what to me felt like a slightly utopian impulse or character of some aspects of queer sex. So, I think it was more around an estrangement of the present that I used it. The real spirit of the book in terms of vernaculars that I still can stand behind is this ballad, a 17th century ballad called "The Powtes Complaint," which was—I think most historical accounts of this ballad do confirm that it was like an actual popular ballad and not like some creepy prurient projection of Fen tiger militancy or militancy of the

people that were living in the Fens as they were being drained to turn them into pasture land, to very inefficient pasture land, to graze animals on. And I'll just read the first like stanza of “The Powtes Complaint.” It goes:

> “Come, brethren of the water, and let us all assemble,
> To treat upon this matter, which makes us quake and tremble;
> For we shall rue it, if’t be true that fens be undertaken
> And where we feed in fen and reed, they'll feed both beef and bacon.”

So this is about, it's written from the perspective maybe of a fish that lives in these Fen lands, but it's obviously metaphorically the people that live in the Fen lands who are facing down this massive mega-engineering project that took centuries, in part because of very effective resistance that at times would really stop this mega-engineering project to drain this fen and eliminate the way that people had learned to live in this environment and turn it into really propertizable, as I said, pasture land, which we all know is like much less efficient in terms of like feeding numbers of people. And what I really found just brilliant was this, again, another inversion, like “where *we* feed in fen and read, they'll feed both beef and bacon” and making it clear that, you know, they don't say “will feed cows and pigs,” but “they'll feed both beef and bacon.” And it's just really making it clear that, you know, it's people living in an extremely essentially pretty pauperized but sustainable way who are facing down this extractivist project that is really about producing animals as commodities. And that just, I don't know. And it also, “The Powtes Complaint” ends with this very explicit militant cry where—oh, I'm going to read this too:

> “The feather'd fowls have wings, to fly to other nations;
> But we have no such things, to help our transportations;
> We must give place (oh grievous case) to horned beasts and cattle,
> Except that we can all agree to drive them out by battle.”

And that just, I don't know, I would go back to that over and over again. And I guess I would say like this militant popular ballad was—that was really screening, in a way that's just absolutely so affecting, the horror of the way that capitalism works spatially to turn sustenance into the site of these extractive industries. And that was just very, yeah, inspiring and affecting, I guess.

AM

Yeah, that, I mean, that may sort of answer the next question that I had, but I'm just interested in hearing you say a little bit about—like, one of the things that is so amazing about teaching the novel is the way that it has all of these sort of hidden, not entirely hidden, but more hidden 18th century histories that it kind of exposes or unearths, right? So, I mean, the sort of sex work plot and the way that you're thinking about queer life in particular, but also the Lascars and the Maroons, and then especially the Fens. And, you know, one of the things that I've found interesting when I teach the novel is that I often teach a little bit from Marx’s writing about the enclosures and primitive accumulation, because that seems like the sort of obvious text to put in dialogue with the account that you give in the novel of the Fens. However, it also feels not quite right. Like it feels, I mean, some of what you were saying already gets at this, but like, there's a

way in which what happens to the Fens is different than the enclosure of common lands to make hunting grounds for Lords, right, for the aristocracy and the gentry. So, yeah, I'm just sort of curious—and also the other difference is that there is a longer and in some ways a more successful history of resistance. So, I'm just sort of curious, how did you get obsessed with the Fens? And then is there like—what do you think is the connection between the sort of history of the Fens, the history of the Maroons, and the history of the Lascars in the novel?

JR

Yeah. So, I was just thinking of mega-engineering projects in their imperial dimensions and in their domestic dimensions. And I guess in a way, one of the things you can do with a novel is just put everything together in one room that really takes place in different places and at different times. So, I think what was going on with the Fens was that I was staging some of everything happening in the same place. So I was staging this kind of forcing of people from the countryside into the city through the drainage alongside the kind of imperial production of the South Asian population in Britain that were press-ganged in every, you know—I think most people know about this—the press-ganging of people into working on East India Company ships and then just abandoning them in the ports and the docks in London. And I think there, I was just kind of like, I think I was impressed on a certain level in that way that you are, where you're like, oh, you know, things have not always been the way they are now. And I think I was learning about the fact that, say, interracial marriage was much more common in the early 18th century, the late 17th century. There were a lot of South Asian people in London because of this practice. And I think I just imaginatively ended up sort of trying to move one of those characters from the ports into the countryside and put everybody all together, but it was really a kind of a compression.

AM

It seems to me that you're sort of suggesting that in the same way you were talking about interracial marriage in this period, that there's something also; that there's a similar—there's more flexibility with respect to gender and sexuality in the 18th century than there will be in the 19th century. Right.? And again, I use that with my students to convince them that we're not talking about just a very slow progress narrative where, like, there's the bad old days and then finally we sort of get woke in the 21st century. But rather that there's sort of cycles of this and that those cycles also happen to map on very, very, very nicely, often, with cycles and capital accumulation and changes in political economy. So yeah, I'm just sort of curious about what you think, you know, how does looking back on this 18th century period help us think about queerness and gender in the present? Is this a project of sort of uncovering or recovering a history that's there that we haven't attended to? Or do you see it more in the sort of playful speculative vein where you're sort of describing in terms familiar to contemporary queer theory, something that like was only sort of like nascent or sort of unspoken or emergent in this earlier period?

JR

Well, I mean, I guess it started, again, in the archive, because then after I read the Linebaugh, I just started reading everything I could find in the archive about Jack Sheppard. There's a lot of material that's just anonymous, that's broadsides, there's fictionalized dialogues or monologues of Sheppard after his death. There was a lot. And there are a number of fictionalized biographies or autobiographies of him, even in the period. One of which famously, of course has been attributed to Defoe. So, the thing that struck me about those texts was really, just on a very basic level, the way that there was a kind of constant return to the idea of him having a certain amount of gender deviance. And that was always tied to his ability to flout the rules of capital or of the jail. So, I think I just was very compelled, you know, by the way in which we're seeing kind of gender, I really don't even want to say nonconformity, but really gender deviance, as a way in the 18th century, wittingly or unwittingly, to describe a kind of opposition to the enshrining of private property, and that it had a kind of utopian character. To go back to that scene of Linebaugh's drawing of comrades showing up for someone's execution and really believing that they're going to be able to intervene in a certain way. I really just wanted to write a novel—I guess to me, this feels very queer, but a novel that was about, like, tenderness and militancy.

AM

So, this is also this very interesting part of the hits different when you are teaching it after COVID, which is the part of the novel about the plague ships and the quarantine and the ways in which the police state essentially takes it as a kind of opportunity to restrict people's movement. So, this is where Bess is trying to convince all of the other sort of sex workers in the cat house to understand what's going on, and says:

> “Bess stood speaking to the entire room.
>
> ‘Plague's an excuse they're using to police us further.’
>
> She looked out. Most continued to quaff and quarrel amongst themselves.
>
> ‘All of you, they're panicking the people deliberately. It's a securitizational furor they're raising to put more sentinels in the streets. Can't you see that?’
>
> Jack chewed his cheek. He thought back to the thefts of the past week. Each gauze kerchief he unpacked. Each leather purse he handled. Each potentially plaguey.”

One of the things I love about these dialogues between Jack and Bess in this part of the novel is that it's essentially like Bess has to do the work of educating Jack, giving him a political education, right? And there's a certain resistance on his part, right, and there's a certain way in which he has to be taught how to see things from her perspective. And there's a way in which she seems to have, as is always the case, right, with those who meet the wrath of the security and the carceral state first, she seems to have a kind of anticipatory prescience, right? She understands what's going on in a way that he can't. And so partly, I just want to sort of ask you about that dynamic between them and the ways that—I don't know. Yeah. It seems to me that this is a kind of bildungsroman that's not just about coming into one's gender and sexuality, but also coming into one's political consciousness, and what it means to sort of be brought there by someone else—as we all are in various ways.

JR

I think I just was—and almost like historical accuracy be damned. I think that's in a way what happened here, but I was just, in terms of what you're talking about with the dialogue—like I wasn't like, ooh, I'm going to do some interesting, like historiographic metafiction. There was nothing. I was just like, I am driven to represent for whatever reasons, someone getting radicalized through a romantic relationship. So, I really was kind of, you know, interested in thinking about subjectivities that would be more politically developed coming from the countryside because there's such stereotypes and bias in North America around the countryside being a place of political underdevelopment. So I was, you know, interested in kind of staging that with the two of them, but I also was very emotionally attached to the idea of, you know, whatever, that this was in a way an important composition of the romantic relationship between these two characters was that one was radicalizing the other. The idea that—for me, the idea that Jack as a character was becoming attached, not only to Bess, but that through that radicalization, it was being shown to him that he could be attached to a larger social world.

AM

Well, and the romance of the whole milieu of comrades, right? Like, there's the way in which what he falls in love with, isn't just her. It's just, it's the whole thing, right?

JR

Yeah. Yes.

AM

Maybe that's a good opportunity to ask you to talk a little bit about theory and the novel. And so, in here I'm thinking both about the way that theory shows up in this novel. I mean, I think it shows up most obviously in the footnotes, but it also shows up in so many—it's such a pleasure to read as a person who reads the same theory as you, because I can sort of find, like, I can *feel* the Linebaugh and I can *feel* Fred Moten and I can *feel* Saidiya Hartman, and I can clock all of the sort of thematic moments, whether they show up in the footnotes or not. But I'm just interested in the way that you're sort of putting theory and fiction in conversation with each other. And I ask that partly as an invitation to get you to talk a little bit about your other work. I'm thinking both of the two pieces of autotheory of yours that I particularly love and also teach often in lit theory classes, which is your essay on Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and your relationship with your mother. And then “The Daddy Dialectic” essay also about sort of paternity and Marx. And I gather, because I have heard you read bits and pieces over the years of the new project, that the new project sort of bears some relationship to this connection between fiction and theory. So, I'm just sort of curious if you want to say something about how that works in *Confessions* or in the essays or in the new work or all of the above.

JR

Okay, the connection between fiction and theory. You know, the poet and critic that we both, I think, know, Amy De'Ath, has a really nice way of talking about this. Amy De'Ath says:

"Literary texts do theorize, but they do so to the extent that they engage the dialectics of aesthetic experience to think about the relation between sense perception and total system."

So, they're theorizing, but it is very much about doing so I think through producing a feeling, but then she says: "literary texts can't really do it for themselves." They can't really theorize fully for themselves. It's partial. They need dialectical readers, to fully kind of produce the theory. So. I really love—I love this way of thinking about the relationship between theory and fiction that it, you know, I don't even need a dialectical reader. I just need a reader who's going to cry. So that's one thing. But I love a dialectical reader, and best is a dialectical reader who cries. I think I already spoke to this question of, you know, there is a lot of theory-speak in the novel, but honestly, the, the most, I think, robust way that theory shows up in the novel is structurally in a sense that it's shaped around these questions of uneven development. It's shaped around these questions of primitive accumulation. In the parts that take place in the present, there's a lot of, you know, theory banter and jokes. What I've ultimately come to like about the interplay of the sections that take place in the present, dispossessive university and the past, where you have Jack Sheppard and his band of comrades really trying to organize against this proto-police force was illuminated to me recently. I was reading something by an anonymous author, someone who's taken the name Aziz Yafi in the journal *Palestine Studies*. He wrote—or they, she, I don't know—wrote a piece called "Digging Tunnels with Pens: Anonymous Publishing as Intellectual Resistance." And there are many amazing points made in this, but one is just a really, really well put conceptualization that has become incredibly, just violently, evident in the present. But they say: "our institutions demand theory without practice." And so maybe, you know, the sections that take place in the present, there's a lot of theory, there's not so much practice, with that character. But there's a lot of practice in the parts in the past. So, I guess I feel more than anything relieved that these two sections exist together because I think they're—the extent to which our institutions have demanded theory without practice is really, really terrifying and pernicious.

AM

And is there a way that that sort of, that those questions are showing up in the, in the new book?

JR

Oh, oh, right. See, but I—it's great to forget some of your questions because then I don't have to answer the hard ones. [laughter] The new book is not autofiction, and I kind of swerved away from autofiction after those two essays, which, I mean, I was thinking through something and working through something. But again, in my own, like, self-critique, I think of those pieces as very much of a moment where it was really adjunct and contingent labor and grad students who

were having to pave this path toward a kind of public intellectualism and public-facing scholarship. And in part because of the, the intense precarity of the job market, in large part because of that. And I really feel like I couldn't have jumped on that form of thought and writing if they hadn't developed (A) forms, or, you know, revived certain forms of the essay and (B) developed venues. So, for writing the novel, the second novel, I really swerved away from that autofiction and I guess I would say—and tried to rid this next novel of my voice as much as possible. It's written in the voice of a totally other character who's loosely based on my mother. But the thing I'll say about style is that I really am just trying to write a humor novel and the way I've come to think about writing a humor novel and its, perhaps, minimal value in the world, or whatever value it might have. I'm not really so interested in this question of the value of my own novel. But this question of humor and the value of humor—my partner, Jasbir Puar, actually put it a way that I can't put it any better than this when she was describing the uses of humor writing for the left, and she just put it in an offhand way one day. And she was like, it's about producing work that lessens the anxiety of the left, so that we can think through things with a little bit of a relaxation or a little bit of a lessened state of anxiety that makes thinking and working a little bit easier, thinking through hard things. So this book actually is about—it's a confrontation with Zionism and homophobia. And I think for me, humor is a way to—I just really like thinking about it as a way to relax a reader enough to deal with, you know, difficult feelings or thought processes. But it's a nice way to think about humor in general, I think. It is style.

RB

I go back again and again to *The New York Times* saying that you are an academic and quote, “also very funny.” That's relaxing for a purpose too, right? [laughter] So one of the perks of hosting this podcast is that hosts get to jump in at the end with the very last question of the episode. And each season of *Novel Dialogue* has one signature question that we ask of every novelist. I'll pause and say that this question in particular would have maybe felt even more pointed to ask had we initially recorded the day we were supposed to, which was November 6th. And this season, our question is: Jordy, if you could live anywhere else in the world for a year, where would it be and why?

JR

Does it have to be else? Because I would like to be living here during a revolutionary uprising. That's the, I mean, that's the truest answer I could give. Does Annie get to answer it too?

AM

I mean, I think that's pretty much it. You know, I'm teaching *The Dispossessed* right now, so I think I would like to live on another planet, in a revolutionary uprising.

JR

Rebecca, what about you?

RB

No, it's the same. I mean, my answer was going to be the twisty historical path versus, you know, spatial dislocation answer too. And I too am like, I—this is something, I mean, again, living in Florida, a place where lots of people, since I moved here, have sort of said, don't you want to be elsewhere? Right? And my answer has always been the same deeply grim one that we were talking about earlier before we started recording, right? Which is like, but everywhere is becoming Florida, right?

AM

Yeah.

RB

I don't really think that there's a kind of *where* that's outside of most of this. I'm not really an enclave girl myself in my utopianism, you know, I want to be living here differently.

JR

I guess we got to get to organizing.

RB

I guess so. That's yeah. It's like I said, it was a question that when I realized we came up with this question a while ago. This is one of the last episodes we're recording for the season, and so when I realized we were recording on this day with that question, I thought, oh no, here we are.

AM

Yeah.

JR

Yeah.

AM

At least, at least none of us were like, Canada! [laughter]

JR

Yeah.

AM

Portugal!

JR

Yes. Right. Yes. Golden visa! Right. Yeah.

RB

Well, as always, we're grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to *Public Books* for its partnership, and to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern, and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out past episodes featuring Lauren Groff, Charles Yu, Jennifer Egan, and many more. And if you liked what you heard, please subscribe on Apple, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us at *Novel Dialogue*, thanks so much for tuning in. Keep listening and keep reading.