ENGLISH TARGET TEXT

Excerpt of my translation of *Ceci n’est pas une ville* (Murat, 2016) targeted to a US audience:

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(1) A few years ago, I wouldn’t have thought it possible to *fall in love* with a city. The phrase itself seemed odd – inappropriate, even. I lumped it in with those metaphors used by certain writers, like the one that equates writing a book to giving birth, from conception through gestation to the baby’s publication, an analogy that only ends up insulting both baby and book. Falling in love with a person was normal. Falling in love with a city was nonsense.

(2) Yet, literature is full of declarations of love to Venice, Paris, Mexico City, New York, most of them by men eager to penetrate their city of choice, which, naturally, they compare to a woman. “And behold Venice, sitting on the shore, like a beautiful woman ready to fade away with the dying light,” writes François-René de Chateaubriand, in one of his less-inspired moments. More recently, Douglas Kennedy declared: “If London is my wife, Paris is my mistress.” And so on and so forth. There are countless examples.

(3) Of course, I understand that by personifying a city we can better encapsulate our attraction to it. We’re enamored with it, we want to stay there, want to live there. That’s all well and good. But under the surface of the metaphor, there lies a whole realm of questions waiting to be answered. What does it *really* mean to fall in love with a city? Is it possible to articulate the type of eroticism involved in getting to know it, moving through it, inhabiting it? Why some cities and not others? What exactly is the nature of this attraction, how much of it is fantasy, and what distinguishes it from other types of love? These are the questions I’d like to try to answer.

(4) Because at some point, I had to face it. I had fallen in love with Los Angeles – with the city itself – and not by personifying it as a man or a woman. I hesitated to fully admit it, but I didn’t love Los Angeles like I loved Rome or San Francisco, for example. I was, in fact, *in love*. It was a different kind of connection that I couldn’t really explain and didn’t truly understand. And for me, it is typically out of this need to understand something that a book – and not a baby – is borne.

II

In the middle of nowhere and half a world away

(5) I loved Los Angeles immediately. Utterly. The moment I stepped off the plane. The mild breeze, the soft light – that slightly golden light that still warms my heart every time I exit the terminal. The amusing palm trees, of course. The anonymity of the streets, the borderless expanse of the city, the lack of monuments, the inconceivable freeway system, the classic 50s cars, the different looking neighborhoods, the giant billboards, the calm ordinariness of the urban landscape with its strip malls and parking lots, the overgrowth of lush vegetation no matter the season. The ocean.

(6) Los Angeles is a misshapen, poorly organized city. Los Angeles is an ugly city. Let’s just say it. But what’s most striking is the fact that it seems to have been built without any prior urban planning or official decision-making process. It’s as if its buildings have sprouted up, lackadaisically, in random pockets of space. Dozens of neighborhoods, some themselves independent cities (Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, Culver City, etc.), comprise this urban sprawl. This seamless patchwork shawl. This anomaly. As Frank Lloyd Wright once put it: “Tip the world over on its side and everything loose will land in Los Angeles.”

(7) I’m always surprised to hear the sneering remarks about California’s supposed obsession with body image and appearance, and about Los Angeles, more specifically, as a very image-conscious city – a characteristic which supposedly stems from its film industry (people there speak of ‘the industry,’ not ‘the cinema’). Sure, you come across the former actress types with their beehive hairdos and cat-eyed glasses, the toned personal trainers with perfectly white teeth, or the occasional bleached blond who could be straight out of *Baywatch* and now, past the thirty mark, will soon be undergoing plastic surgery, which is advised early on, much like the “preventative Botox” recommended to teenagers, or rather, to teenage girls. But these characters, whom you occasionally spot at the supermarket or behind the wheel of their convertible, are a mere drop in the ocean. With almost 4 million people in Los Angeles proper, and over 18 million in the surrounding L.A. County, it is the very diversity of this population – comprised of 140 different nationalities and 224 different languages, not including dialects – that makes the city *unbelievably real*. A million people immigrate to the United States each year, and each year, between 600,000 and 700,000 people become citizens. Out of all the states, California has the largest population of individuals applying for citizenship. L.A. is the land of immigration *par excellence*. But the sheer magnitude of this immigration is only truly evident when you live and work in the city, where it is extremely rare to meet someone who is *not* a second-generation, or even first-generation, immigrant. Every day, you hear some variation of the phrase, “When my parents came here…” or “When I first moved here….” But *La-La Land*, the nickname for Hollywood (and sometimes for Los Angeles and California by extension) that evokes a world disconnected from reality, actually only represents a miniscule part of the city, which it falsely reduces to a glamorous media playground, a frenzied choreography of photogenic celebrities travelling from luxury villa to luxury mansion, a gossip-fest for glossy magazines. But Los Angeles is not *People Magazine* in 3D. At least not *only*, in any case. Just as Los Angeles is not only the city of homelessness and racial riots, of poverty, gangs, and segregation.

(8) Some will argue that the diversity of Los Angeles is subject to that checkerboard division so common to American cities, where each square houses a different culture. The gay community in West Hollywood, Iranians in Tehrangeles, Croatians in San Pedro, the Vietnamese in Santa Ana, Blacks in West Adams and Watts, stars in Beverly Hills, gangs in South Central, and that’s not including the dozens of neighborhoods such as Chinatown, Koreatown, Little Tokyo, or Little Ethiopia. But minority community does not imply ghetto, a term ill-suited to this sprawling city of perpetual displacement. For L.A. never stops moving. People commute to and from work; streams of cars constantly line the boulevards. And it’s this incessant flow which mixes the city together. In New York, it’s very possible to never go to Harlem. But the sheer expanse of L.A. means you have to pass through unexpected neighborhoods to get to your destination. So much so that the car, that contemptable yet almost unavoidable means of transportation, functions simultaneously as a vehicle of isolation and connection. To resist this state of affairs is to deny an important aspect of the city and its paradoxical nature. I realized this the day I discovered the work of Robert Flick, especially his *Sequential Views* of Los Angeles, which consists of a series of photographs of a single boulevard or expressway aligned sequentially like the frames of a film strip. Each photograph, which could have been snapped from a car window, constitutes a specific view when seen up close, but it’s the totality of the photographs, seen from afar, that creates the overall impression, and ultimately, the work of art.

(9) Los Angeles may well be a bewildering and unwieldly city, but it is a much more welcoming and livable city than people like to claim or think. On the bus, at the supermarket, in the parking lot, people speak to you, spontaneously, striking up a conversation without being overly intrusive. This very Californian cordiality – a combination of warmth and politeness – doesn’t imply anything, and especially not a desire to form some sort of relationship. It’s more a kind of *savoir-vivre* that makes the day go more smoothly and pleasantly. It comes partly from that feeling of being equal, of being on the same level as others. You notice it instantly, from the way people approach you and start a conversation, without any hint of affectation. Neither high-angle nor low-angle. Just eye-level shots.

(10) I think the city also feels so real, so removed from the fiction of its films, because of the low-density spread of its population, the width of its streets lined with low-rise houses, its urban sprawl, and its infinite horizon – whose sweeping breadth no camera lens, not even a wide-angle one, can truly capture. Los Angeles, like a vast ever-expanding puddle, is a horizontal city, stretching along the foot of the hills, just as New York, standing upright, is a vertical one. Consequently, you always have a clear perspective on things. And I mean that literally as well as figuratively. The future is always within sight, you can’t help but look ahead, and far ahead. No matter where you are in the city, it’s not an apartment building, not a street or a neighborhood that you see, but a panorama. Even downtown, where 1920s and 30s skyscrapers pierce the horizon, there is always an open space for the imagination. Since your body is never confined, impeded, restricted in this wide-open city without borders, it feels free to occupy itself, because there’s space for it, more than enough space. Los Angeles, this global village that’s impossible to encompass, is the very opposite of a movie set.

(11) It’s a city that entices you to envision the future. The old (tried and true) saying, “In America, anything seems possible,” has never been as applicable as it is here. The city’s geography and landscape contribute significantly to this impression. Between mountains and desert, Los Angeles looks out onto the Pacific. On the other side of the ocean, to the West, is Asia. To the East, New York is a 6-hour flight away, Paris a 12-hour flight. There’s a 9-hour time difference with Europe, a 15-hour time difference with China. Los Angeles is far from everything. Even San Francisco is a 6-hour drive away, and it’s a 4-hour flight to Mexico City. And so, the only option is to construct a world, within a borderless city, where you feel like you are simultaneously in the middle of nowhere and half a world away.

(12) In front of City Hall, there’s a good gauge for really understanding how far Los Angeles is from the rest of the world. It’s a signpost entitled “Sister Cities,” and it indicates (in miles) the distance between Los Angeles and all the cities that it’s paired with around the world. It reads:

Athens (Greece) 6,925

Auckland (New Zealand) 6,499

Beirut (Libya) 7,499

Bordeaux (France) 5,742

Busan (South Korea) 5,973

Eilat (Israel) 7,744

Giza (Egypt) 7,606

Guangzhou (China) 7,436

Ischia (Italy) 6,448

Jakarta (Indonesia) 8,977

Kaunas (Lithuania) 5,901

Lusaka (Zambia) 10,017

Makati (Philippines) 7,406

Mexico City (Mexico) 1,511

Mumbai (India) 8,710

Nagoya (Japan) 5,633

Saint Petersburg (Russia) 6,925

Salvador (Brazil) 6,151

San Salvador (Salvador) 2,301

Split (Croatia) 6,286

Taipei (Taiwan) 6,789

Tehran (Iran) 7,582

Vancouver (Canada) 1,081

Yerevan (Armenia) 7,198

(13) Part of the difficulty in conceptualizing the city comes from the impossibility, not only of comprehending its distance from the rest of the world, but also of comprehending its own size and scale. How do you visualize 503 square miles? Perhaps by imagining that within Los Angeles alone, you could easily house seven other American cities: San Francisco, Boston, Minneapolis, Pittsburg, Milwaukee, Saint Louis, Cleveland, and Manhattan. It’s therefore not surprising that Angelenos complain about their daily commutes. But this largeness is one of the most identifiable features of the city; with such largeness comes the promise of an ever-present elsewhere which is always within reach. What’s more, Los Angeles, this city in perpetual motion, is constantly changing its appearance. Just as you get to know a neighborhood, it changes; stores adopt a new look or completely change their merchandise, apartment buildings spring up, new populations of people appear. So much so that every day, Los Angeles feels like a living organism whose heart beats, whose blood circulates, whose body moves and mind thinks. In short, it’s the complete opposite of a “museum-city.”

(14) I have nothing against movie sets or museum exhibits. *Au contraire*. In some ways, you could even say the museum-city is my place of comfort, my origins, my culture – but is it therefore my identity? Trieste, Amsterdam, Zagreb, Prague, Copenhagen, Venice all belong to that European tradition of balanced proportions and harmonious tones, whose charm captivated me and even mesmerized me for such a long time. I could have lived out my days in Paris, where I was born, where I grew up and lived for almost forty years, and I would have been perfectly content. But life intervened. And life always knows best.