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Author

Khamo, Nanar

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The City that is not a City: An Interview with Laure Murat

*In many ways, Laure Murat's career evokes travel in its different iterations. At UCLA, she is a professor of French and Francophone Studies, as well as director of the Center for European and Russian Studies. As a public intellectual, she has initiated the program "Sonnets and Sonatas," a series of lecture-concerts that explores cultural themes in a format accessible to the public. In this interview, I ask her questions related to her book *Ceci n'est pas une ville* (Flammarion, 2016) to raise questions about "travel" in general by focusing on the City of Angels as a crossroads and a city in flux. This interview represents an abridged version of a conversation we had on the sunny afternoon of April 11, 2017 at UCLA's Faculty Center.*

Nanar Khamo: Thank you so much for this interview. Just to start off, the subject of your text, *Ceci n'est pas une ville*, is Los Angeles. Had you travelled to LA before you moved here for the position at UCLA? And, if so, how has your impression changed as a result of living here versus travelling here?

Laure Murat: It's a huge difference, of course. I had been to LA just once before settling here when I got the job. It was, I vaguely remember, the late 90s, probably '97, something like that. It was a tour of California; I went to San Francisco, the Bay Area and I ended up in LA only for a few days, like five days. I didn't understand anything about LA. It just was so bizarre and difficult to understand. I cannot say if I liked or disliked LA. I had a lot of questions, basically, about it. I thought it was interesting, but nothing special. But it was also during this first trip to California that I decided that I wanted to live here, in California. At the time, it was impossible to conceive that one day that I could come to United States. I was not a professor; I didn't have a PhD. And then in 2006, I got the interview for UCLA and then I fell in love with LA immediately. Obviously, like everyone [I loved] the weather, the quality of light, the space, the fact that it's a huge playground, in a way, with open spaces and your body is never blocked. You always have the horizon and, I think, metaphorically, that is very important.

NK: On that subject of Los Angeles and space, do you read your book title ironically? If Los Angeles isn't a "ville," then what is it?

LM: Of course, of course, and I am asking that question in the book. I can make the argument that it's a city or it's not a city. It's playing with the title of René Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*.

NK: And it's great that it's here, too, at LACMA. [*Ed note: The painting is on view at The Los Angeles County Museum of Art.*]

LM: Exactly, exactly. Again, you can make both arguments. In my opinion, it's, at the same time, less and more than a city, because of its configuration. Also, what I mean by that is that all the cities that I know—I travel all over the world, but I don't know Asia, for instance, so there is a huge part of the world that I don't know—but all the cities that I've visited in South America, the United States, in Europe, in the Maghreb follow more or less the same pattern. There is a center, a pattern, monuments, a geopolitical grid. African cities are different. But basically, you have one pattern. Los Angeles, I don't know anything like it. I said *anything*, right? Because the fact that there is no center, no monuments, is, for me, extremely freeing, extremely liberating. Many people, specifically Europeans, are disorientated—including Americans. Many Americans don't like LA. Let's put it another other way: disorientation is fun.

NK: I like the bits in the book about the Museum of Jurassic Technology, which is such a fabulous museum. Have you seen similar museums elsewhere and would you want other cities to have this type of museum space. Would it be special to have it unique to LA?

LM: I had the opportunity to go to the Museum of Jurassic Technology during my first month in LA. I was so enthusiastic in the beginning and I am as enthusiastic as the beginning—but in the beginning, everything is new—but I associate the Museum of Jurassic Technology in its specificity and singularity with LA. There is a correspondence between the two. First, I don't know any museum that is comparable anywhere and I have been to many museums in my life. It's also because it's the museum of one mastermind [David Wilson] who got a MacArthur "genius grant" because I think that this guy has a truly original mind and I love the fact that it's in LA. [...] It's a reflection of LA; it's an openness of the imaginary. It's many things, but it's that at the core principal. That's the way that *I* see LA. I don't know if that's the way LA *is*, but it's the way that *I* envision it. And certainly you can come up with museums like this, but the problem is that is linked to one personality and a very specific one. It's very exhilarating. Not everyone understands and appreciates the irony and the great subtlety of the museum. It's much more complicated than you think at first.

NK: Based on your own travels, do you think it is possible to know a place if you visit but not live permanently? Does travel have its limitations?

LM: That's a very difficult question. For sure, LA is impossible. Even when you live in LA, you don't know LA. After 10 years now, 11 years, I'm still discovering so many new things. [...] Yes, you can know some cities. For instance, I've been to Venice multiple times in my life, or Rome. There are places where I've been on a regular basis and I think I know them a little bit. I think it's possible.

NK: Do you think some of LA's opaqueness has to do with its massive scale?

LM: Yes, definitely. I think part of it is the scale. In the book, I talk about this map that shows that you can put seven cities inside LA, including San Francisco, Boston, Minneapolis—not small cities. So when you see the map, you understand, because it's very complicated for people to get the whole picture. The scale is one thing and it's well known. The city is changing all the time. I don't think it's the same with Venice (Italy). You can't change Venice every two weeks. That's impossible, because of its patrimony, its heritage, its history. LA can reinvent itself and it does. I think that's a specific thing about LA. Not only it's huge, but it's changing.

NK: It seems like one of the new faces that it's adopting is that it's becoming more of a museum city.

LM: Paris, in this case, is becoming a museum city. And that's perhaps one of the reasons why I love LA so much. And I've realized that many French people love LA, which is very interesting. I think one of the reasons is that that it's almost the opposite of Paris. So you cannot compare. Many people ask me, "Don't you miss *les cafés, les terraces*." But, no, I have palm trees—there are no palm trees in Paris, right? It's something so different and the life style. Paris is the opposite of the LA in that sense that you have the *périphérique* all around Paris that captures in some ways the city. Paris is like in a prison. You cannot expand Paris.

NK: Very true. Going back to the conference theme of travels of mind, body, and soul. Aside from physical travel, to focus on travels of the mind and perhaps soul, what are some of your favorite books or worlds to escape in?

LM: Last summer, I crossed the United States and I stopped only in places named after foreign countries or cities. For me, that's a good example of escaping and being in a place while being in another. Because when you stop in Cairo, or in Troy, or Berlin, New Jersey, you are at the same time in the United States, obviously, and elsewhere. And I think that there is

this component in any travel, right? You have the physical space and the poetic space or the imaginary space; in the case of my road trip, it was around names. Names are also a way of travelling. I think that literature is a way of travelling with your mind, but you can also travel with your mind while you are traveling with your body, at the same time. [...] You can combine the two. When I was preparing for this trip, I read one of the most charming books, to answer your question, called *Travels with Charly* by Steinbeck. And Charly was his poodle. I loved this book; it was so poetic, so interesting, so smart.

NK: As a professor at UCLA and now also a director of the CERS, you have been in a position to bring in scholars from around the world to Los Angeles for invited talks and lectures. Aside from the “obvious” sharing of ideas, do you have any other goals for your students in bringing these scholars? What are you hoping that students—both undergraduate and graduate—will leave with?

LM: It’s essential. It’s completely essential. I feel always sorry for students who cannot or don’t want to travel or to be open to other experiences. Any foreign experience has been an addition for me. It’s always interesting. Always liberating. That’s the dimension of LA to me: the diversity, the population, the ethnicities. I feel comfortable with this kind of settlement, [I feel] more in the world that we live in.

NK: Do you think that ideas “travel” well between the US and French academies? Do you feel that you help contribute to it, particularly in this book?

LM: I think more and more that the circulation is better, in general. I still think that they are very different traditions, very different cultures. Since I’ve been here [in the United States], 12 years now, I think, I noticed that French people are like *cousins germains* with American people but somehow very different. And I don’t know exactly where it’s going, this *rapprochement* between the two countries and the differences, and you can see it with the Weinstein affair and Catherine Deneuve, which is so appalling in my opinion, and I stress again how distant the cultures are. I also noticed that anything that happens in the United States happens in France ten years later. So let’s say that the *exception culturelle* is to be ten years late.

NK: As a graduate student, I appreciated reading your journal tidbits and glimpsing an insider perspective of the life of a faculty member. Do you have any particular advice for graduate students who wish to travel

in all of its iterations—mind, body, soul—and see the world in its many manifestations?

LM: Do I have advice for them? No, I don't think so. I think they need to find their own ways, since everyone is so different. And students are usually, but not always, travelling for their studies, which is a great way to discover [the world]. When you have a goal, questions, it's excellent.

NK: I think your earlier remarks about not needing to divorce travel of the mind and physical travel is great advice, so thank you for that. If the text were to be translated into English, how do you think an Anglophone reaction would differ from a French and Francophone one?

LM: Not all Americans know LA, of course. LA, again, has such a bad reputation, which is so ridiculous, in my mind. So I don't know if there are so many aficionados of LA in the United States. I have been struck that most people who have been born here usually, but not always, want to get out. It's a vast majority of people that I've met—doesn't mean that it's a principle—but I've noticed that people born here want to escape and people who arrive here to live usually love it at once or another group who needed two years to adjust. It's a very common pattern.

NK: I have had the privilege of attending almost all of the Sonnets and Sonatas lecture-concerts (I missed the first one!). I have been so enthralled with the format: you present a theme that links the 19th and 20th centuries; you frame your lecture around this theme and then introduce pieces of music that take us on different voyages. I feel transported from my reality when I'm a part of that audience. You are bringing together the academic and public communities—a sort of local travel, a local exchange. Was this your goal from the inception of the project? How did you develop it?

LM: Yes, exactly. I'm doing Sonnets and Sonatas exactly as I teach undergraduates exactly as I'm teaching for graduate students, as I'm writing my books. I cannot do otherwise. I don't have other methods. Of course, [Sonnets and Sonatas] is a performance, it's a show, but teaching is a performance, too, but a different one, it doesn't have the entertaining component. Bridge the gap between the university and the larger audience, definitely; bridge the gap between faculty (me, and Guillaume Sutre, who was the musical director) and the students; bridge the gap between UCLA, a public university, and the Getty institution, a private institution; bridge the gap, connect the dots, connect people. Visuals, the musical, the literary—to understand that arts are linked. If I have to talk about Baudelaire, I will

bring into it music, painting, what is romanticism, what is realism. I think it's very important to understand that arts are not isolated. They are not alone. Courbet is not painting alone in his studio. Of course, he does, but he is also inventing something at the time that photography is invented, at the time where Berlioz is composing. So, of course, we are all living in the same world, right? Specifically now with the social media, modern communication and everything. I think it's very important at the CERS, for instance, I would like to bridge the gap between north and south campus. Things like that are really difficult. People are reluctant. They don't want to quit their own territory. They don't want to mix too much. But the more I can do that, the happier I am.