



Interview with Andrew Wessels, writer of *A Turkish Dictionary* published by 1913 Press
Laura Vena

“I’m not sure when or how I awoke, the sounds of a song lingering in the memory of my ears. In the window of my hotel room, I expect to see my face. And the image looking back

A mosaic rose set into the exterior wall of the
next building.”

“I begin with what I see to come
to what I know.”

-*A Turkish Dictionary*, Andrew Wessels

(L) In some ways, *A Turkish Dictionary* is a mapping of the city as experienced by a narrator, who in this case, happens to be an outsider... One could assert that we all are ultimately outsiders due to society’s perpetual hostility, brutality, upheavals, shifts in power, which you track in your book in relation to the history of the place now called Istanbul. In what ways does this dynamic impact the individual navigating the transitional space, the potentially alienating personal interstice that remains?

(A) I think the simple answer is simply that I am always here, and I’m never there. And that’s the reality we always exist in: eternal here-ness, never there-ness. So thinking about that, we are always insiders and never outsiders. Or maybe that means we are always outsiders, unable to exist in any way and in any place other than where we are.

I started writing the book responding to this feeling or impulse. I knew that Istanbul wasn’t my home, but being there I felt so at home. I’m not sure if it was my desire to be at home in the city or just a desire to investigate and explain the sensation. And, as I think we’ll get into during this conversation, what I learned was that the body and the city are both similarly transitional spaces--a continuous unit that is never static nor complete nor traceable nor fully understandable.

“the unique marks
of teeth on my skin
our names graffitied
onto matchbooks
lean me westward
a stalk of tall grass
around my index finger
the purpling of the tip”

(L) One can easily understand how a city is a transitional space. Even in cities in which cultural change has been negligible, shops and people perish, buildings crumble, natural spaces are developed, and industry surges, falters, and is replaced. Cities facilitate movement; they can be entered and exited, overrun, abandoned. They act as a reference point, as well as physical space for social interaction. These involvements are explicitly and specifically explored in your book, where you map the dramatic cultural and political tilts and shifts that have happened in the space that Istanbul now inhabits, and that have contributed to what the city is now. Can you speak more about the body as a transitional space, what it has in common with a city, and how you experienced this in Istanbul or in the writing of *A Turkish Dictionary*? Does this dynamic illuminate anything about the relationship between your body and the city of Istanbul (from next question)?

(A) The neuroscientist Thomas Metzinger has claimed that consciousness “is a wonderfully efficient two-way window that allows an organism to conceive of itself *as a whole*.” He conceives of consciousness as an information-processing model that, in part, requires that we not be aware of the model that produces our first-person perspective. At one point in his work, he compares the link between the mind and the world as being similar to the link between a map and a city. I’m still trying to figure out all of the implications of this metaphor, but I think my approach to the book is an attempt to examine these two things occurring in tandem.

Our body--our self--is something we are continuously in the process of learning. And as we learn more about it, it changes and becomes something else. There is no stasis or stable medium that we can go back to. The city gets mapped, and the moment the map is produced it is already out-of-date. Everything, or nearly everything, has changed or will soon change. Similarly, my self-knowledge is always behind the next change coming up ahead. And none of the changes are inherent. A city isn’t inherently part of a single sovereign nation, under a specific flag, dominated by a specific belief system. It is the momentary product of a variety of forces converging on a specific moment. I see my body and self similarly.

And by tracing the city and by coming to know the body, that act in itself effects its own changes. The maps I used to trace my walk through Istanbul were fire insurance maps drawn by Jacques Pervititch between 1922-1945. These maps not only highlight the vast changes the city has undergone in the subsequent decades, it also shows the way that mapping itself actively changes the course of the city. These maps, the first to try to bring house fires in Istanbul under economic control, begat changes in building styles, regulations, ownership, and development. And in attempting to trace my self through this book, I changed my self. The attempt at circumscription became instead a path away from myself to a new self.

“Where

the call to prayer is the paper dove
on the horizon. Where the sky
can be touched, where it presses down
among us, sliver of ghosts
piled among ghosts. We are old
meat thrown among purple flowers,
tomato vines, imprint of feet held up
against the sky.”

(L) In some senses, your collection seems to portray a haunting. If it can be characterized in this way, is it the city, itself, that is haunted by its past, its ghosts, its missing language, missing bones, or is it the narrator, who in seeking connection or understanding, is haunted by disconnection, self exile? [Even as you note above that Istanbul felt like home, this lingering sense of longing seems to persist here.]

(A) Walking through Istanbul, more perhaps than other cities, one sees the ghosts, the history, the conflicts, the various empires that have risen and fallen. The weight of history is everywhere, as is the constant desire to build and create anew. It is simultaneously a vibrantly new city and ponderously old. And a walk through a city is itself a haunting--one leaves a trace and also leaves no trace at all, and one sees and encounters the traces of others that came before. If we think of our path through anything, we have to think of ourselves as ghosts.

When I see the word disconnection here, it seems like such a bad thing. Or that one might read the book and think that I'm trying to escape disconnection. Which I don't think is the case. Certainly, I'm seeking connections in my exploration of the space, the history, and the language, and of my relationship to all those things. But I didn't and still don't think of the disconnection as a negative or undesirable state nor connection as a desirable state. The process I was thinking about was something more akin to coming to an understanding. So maybe tracing and finding the relationship between my self and the place that surrounds me, the relationship between my body and the city of Istanbul.

“When I looked up from the arabesque
to the sun's steam spreading itself
across the carpet where I kneeled surrounding
me heat grass appropriating my limbs
the face appeared through the room
steady above me gently approaching
a touch to my side. Bid me exit. Understand
what is both in and around me, alone
unseen, searching for the mistake that world
complete the search. Sit over the water.”

(L) This is also a tracking of cultural and political displacement and an accounting of the injuries and omissions in the wake of violent upheavals and cultural decimation. An autopsy of a city, perhaps, that was, but is no longer. Is the city of Istanbul a palimpsest, in a way? Are all cities and all

cultures in some essential way this? Is this something you aimed to track through *A Turkish Dictionary*?

(A) An important touchstone, thinking of Benjamin, is his “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Exposé of 1935” in which he first begins tracing the rise and fall of the Parisian arcades. The construction and loss of the arcades is tied up in technological advancements, migrations, notions of the self, local economics, global economics, and war. Thinking about Istanbul in particular, the rise of the Arcades also closely follows the colonialist campaigns from France and the rest of the West to claim Ancient Greek culture by stealing countless archaeological and artistic treasures from the Ottoman Empire and the rest of the Middle East. In this short piece, Benjamin reveals the city and our experience in the city as a nexus point for all of these things and more. I think the idea of the palimpsest is an important one--the city as an endless writing and writing-over and erasure that occurs moment by moment, with the city itself as some strange mix of all of these. And that any attempt to capture a city in words, so to speak, is both adding to and retracting from this process.

The city we now call Istanbul has been continuously occupied since, for practical purposes, the beginning of history. It’s been known as a litany of names, from Byzantium to Constantinople to now Istanbul and many others in between. The location of this city has been a vitally important, powerful place desired by world rulers for millennia. Over these thousands of years, various ruling epochs have passed through the same space, the city shifting from pagan rulers to Catholic rulers to Orthodox Christian to Muslim and now to a somewhat tenuous century of secularism. Peoples of various ethnic backgrounds have risen to prominence, held on, and faded away. More than perhaps any other city in the world, Istanbul puts forth the inherent transience of life on earth, and in more than any city I’ve ever visited, the ghosts of that transience are on display. The space has stayed the same, and there have been a succession of attempts to corral that space, always failed or at best semi-successful.

Istanbul also provides an interesting counterpoint to American history. It’s easy to think of America as being “new” if we subscribe to the typical Western understanding of our history. But of course we reside in a country that has been populated for millennia as well. However, that history has largely been erased both in terms of the history we are taught and in what we visibly see as we explore our own country. Istanbul displays this aggregation of history more than most places, but I do think it’s inherent everywhere, whether we like it or not.

“That first evening was altitude, only thinking of the blood coursing through the throat, looking out upon this overbuilt city, the distance between the sound of the waves.”

(L) And what is the relationship of the city to the individual? Everything here seems weighted, weighing upon the narrator’s psyche, sensibilities. What burden does this narrator carry in regards to the city and its history?

(A) As I explored the city, I realized that the body is similar in terms of this continuous change. The body is a singular space that is unchanging as an entity. Or, more specifically, our consciousness makes us perceive our selves in this way. But of course, the body is always changing, whether we talk biologically of our cells replenishing, or of our psychologies. The self can change belief systems,

perspectives, desires, and goals while the notion of the self remains statically continuous. Then there is also the studies of how trauma in previous generations still show up and haunt successive generations who never personally experienced the trauma. For the narrator of the book, the journey also coincides with a conversion from a Christian background to Islam. Did the narrator's body change or not? What stays the same, what changes, what is that core element that constitutes the person or the city? Or, as I ask in the book, what part is necessary?

So I saw this interplay between stable entity and ever-shifting entity both in the person and the place, and how the person and place act on each other to generate these stases and shifts. The concept of the person and the concept of the city these locatable but empty spaces, into which we can place a multitude. To think of Benjamin's bio-maps, I was thinking about how the individual traces a city by walking it and also how a city traces and delineates the self: where you are from, where you are now, where you might be going, and what you are not.

**"The tendril snakes its way through
sin, my throat an open tendril
turns blue across red, the taste"**

L) As Walter Benjamin walks the city, he fixes his gaze, but he also lives: he notes his particular and intimate experiences of and in a space, exploring the ephemeral nature of those moments in interaction with space. Benjamin's bio-cartographer is not simply a spectator. He or she lives, loves, longs for, bleeds and fights. Or, if I can quote from a paper I wrote on the subject:

"So long as the human consciousness remains within the hills, canyons, cliffs, and the plants, clouds, and sky, the term landscape, as it has entered the English language, is misleading—A portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view" (Leslie Silko). This favors the eye / I that gazes, that sweeps across a vista, adding perforated lines at the boundaries, that perceives and surveys, but doesn't experience or interact, doesn't vibrate with the wind. This idea that we are separate, alone is faulty. "Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on" (Silko).

What is the role of the human gaze in *A Turkish Dictionary*? To what degree does the narrator embody the role of spectator or is a part of or is becoming a part of the city / the space? Is the participation in these moments of interaction a finding or a losing of self, or am I reaching for labels here that don't resonate?

(A) I recently read T.J. Clark's *The Sight of Death*, which is a series of diary entries in which Clark looks upon and attempts to discuss two Nicolas Poussin paintings: *Landscape with a Calm* and *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. (It might be important here to note that in the book Clark mentions that he is reading Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* while writing these diary entries.) In the prefatory remarks, written after the last diary entry but placed before the first entry, Clark writes:

"But astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface, what is salient and what incidental alter bewilderingly from day to day, the larger order of the depiction breaks up, recrystallizes, fragments again, persists like an afterimage. And slowly the question arises: What is it, fundamentally, I am returning to in this particular case?"

This process becomes troubled, though. The gaze is also a political force of power, and the published history of Istanbul is almost entirely dominated by Western writers defining and circumscribing the city and culture of Istanbul: Edmondo de Amicis, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Pierre Gilles, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. These works almost religiously seek to find Constantinople underneath the present layer of Istanbul. They seek to erase the living city and identify some remaining core of the “true” preceding city, as if Constantinople had itself been a static thing, as if the contemporary city surrounding the writer were just a facade and not in fact what was actually there.

It's only more recently that Turkish writers have been given marginally more space, such as Kaya Genc and Orhan Pamuk. So, thinking about this ethical aspect is where the trope of the dictionary comes into *A Turkish Dictionary*. I wanted to avoid being a subject defining an object; the city, instead, was an agent--perhaps the agent--of the book. And the use of the dictionary--which never ends up defining anything at all other than the space between--as a thematic element became a way to trouble the notion of defining: of finding or even losing one's self, a word's meaning, or a map of the city. These are at best fruitless efforts and at worst ethically problematic, tied as they are to power and dominance.

Over the course of the book, I found myself arriving at a similar realization as Clark: What was I looking at? What was I experiencing? What did any of these words I'm writing mean? Who was I before and who had I become? I continuously and simultaneously found and lost myself, found and lost the city, found and lost faith.

**“The waters flow past the prophet's footprint.
The view tonight is so rare.”**

(L) What do you think accounts for the impulse here to seek origins? What can be gained? What is at the heart of the longing that it attempts to fill / respond from? (pp.50, 70)

(A) That's an impulse I've always had--wanting to know more, to know the backstory, to know where something started. I'm not sure if that's a writerly impulse, a historian's impulse, or what, exactly. Maybe just that finding an origin is a natural human desire. Whether that's celebrating our birthday or anniversary, or whether that's ascribing to the origin story of some culture or religion or scientific theory.

Of course, what happens is that the origin point is never located. Each origin point is preceded by a new preceding moment or fact, if not a web stretching out in every direction. So the impulse is futile--though I'd argue not pointless. While I can't say exactly what the value of the journey is to find the origin or fill that void, I am certain that there is something gained in the journey itself.

“The language within the geometric design. The language within the failure. The language in the art. The language in the math. The language in the language.”

(L) There is a deep sense of displacement, conflict, and growing loss in this collection. What role did the worsening political upheaval in Turkey have on the writing of your book, *A Turkish Dictionary*?

(A) This is an interesting question, because I think it's referencing the events of the last year or so in Istanbul: the Ataturk airport attack, the failed coup attempt, the Besiktas stadium bombing, the Reina nightclub attack, the Syrian refugee crisis throughout the country, the recent constitutional referendum, and the ongoing crisis and attacks along the Syrian and Iraq borders. However, all of these post-date the writing of *A Turkish Dictionary*.

As the book has come out, these events have informed my ongoing understanding of the work, and I think they have changed the conversations that I'm having around the book. They are both not part of the book and, by being the ongoing history of the city, integral to the book.

After 1913 accepted the book and during the production phase, there was a bombing in Sultanahmet Square next to the Obelisk of Theodosius, which killed fourteen people including the suicide bomber. The middle section of the book was written sitting a few yards away from where the bomb went off--my favorite place to sit in that square, and where I likely would have been if I'd been there at the time of the attack. That event ended up emerging into the book during the final editing process. This space, this city has been fought over for millennia. To some degree, whoever rules the Bosphorus and the Hagia Sophia rules the world. It's why England so desperately sought to colonize Turkey in the wake of World War I, why the Fourth Crusade was diverted to Constantinople rather than Jerusalem, and why today it continues to be a contested space.

The city I walked is gone, if it ever existed in that way in the first place.

"The purpose of this book is to explain the vagaries of a poet."

(L) "Our brain is mapping the world. Often that map is distorted, but it's a map with constant immediate sensory input."

—E. O. Wilson

You discuss above how "mapping itself actively changes the course of the city," mentioning the fire maps of Istanbul that transformed building practices in multiple ways. This brings to mind one aspect of human mapping, which is that maps have long been a tool for achieving and maintaining political power. Whether a conduit for exploration and conquest, a way of establishing norms that enforce a particular worldview, or an artefact of imperialism. We can say that maps have traditionally held a position of authority, and were considered objects that communicate geographic truth and objectivity.

Many are using maps for a completely different purpose. While there are individuals already using the conceit of mapping in their artistic practice as a form of intimate, personal expression, do you see a way mapping can be transformative in a progressive, or generative, way? What kind of mapping projects do you hope people engage in to this, or other, end? Is there a practice that can be embraced that rejects an assertion of power? And, if maps are instantly outdated because of the nature of change in a city / in life, what is their lasting significance, if any? Are there any possibilities or promise in mapping that excites you? Do maps hold the possibility of fighting oppression, etc.? Are Turkish writers / artists / thinkers / etc. mapping the city of Istanbul in different ways?

(A) About two years ago in Istanbul, SALT Galeri had an installation exhibit by a group headed by Neyran Turan. The gallery is in an old bank building with its main entrance facing the primary pedestrian shopping walkway in Istanbul, Istiklal Caddesi. The entire entryway had been taken over by a three-dimensional recreation or map of the Bosphorus shipping channel. To enter the gallery, one must walk through this recreation that presents the twists and turns of this difficult-to-navigate channel that countless cargo ships trawl daily. Looking out at the real Bosphorus, the waterway seems serene and spacious. But when viewed in this way, the navigable trench that these military vessels, oil tankers, and freight ships navigate is revealed to be surprisingly narrow and tortuous. And, in fact, the strait is very difficult to navigate in these oversized vessels because of both the physical space as outlined in the map as well as the complex water currents. After navigating the map of the strait, one arrived at a video installation that presented a story of an oil tanker that became stuck in the Bosphorus, blocking all traffic up and down the waterway. Rather than this travesty destroying the city's economy, the city leaders pivoted and filled in the Bosphorus and immediately broke ground on new construction inside the strait. This newly formed land becoming the new luxury, to live on the Bosphorus, to live nearby the oil tanker that ran aground. The failure of navigation turned into a fact of life turned into an opportunity to develop or grow or exploit turned into a monument reminding us to remember some thing that was built or that was conquered/lost or that simply happened.

There is a lot of interest, that I see at least, in various forms of historical mapping in the artistic conversation in Turkey. It's hard to remember a gallery show that I went to that wasn't invested deeply in some way of layering the past, whether that's the distant past of Ottoman or Byzantine times, or the more recent past documenting the more recent changes in the city. What a hundred years ago were small fishing villages far outside of Istanbul have become part of what would now be the central city. This layering of maps, this ability to see time periods across millenia pushing up through the current city, is suffused everywhere. Three artists whose ways of seeing in general, and ways of seeing the city in particular, have affected me are Murat Germen, Gülsün Karamustafa, and Nuri Kuzucan, though there are many others doing wonderfully investigative work.

As for power, that's difficult. To some degree, a map is a tool. And how one uses the tool makes the tool either a tool for positive effects or tools for negative effects. A map of the Bosphorus can be used to exploit the trade resources, or it can be used as it was by Turan to make us see this exploitation. I've also been influenced more recently by the work of MAP Office, an architectural/artistic pair from Morocco and France that works primarily in Hong Kong. Their publication *MAP OFFICE: Where the map is the territory* I think at least proposes that mapping can be a generative, positive process. It is an opportunity, as they claim, "to redraw, recompose and reexamine the territory." Perhaps the onus of responsibility is on us entirely, and to blame the tool is to absolve us of that responsibility.

"And on the other side of the window, the mosaic rose, I press the map against the window to trace the rose's form, letting its way guide my own way through the city. This is what I did and this is what I will do and this is my life..."

(L) This is not an invisible or receding narrator. In fact, your book balances between disclosing a vulnerable self (the consciousness through which this is all filtered) and allowing the city to speak, to be. Is it a goal for you to create an aesthetic of unknowing?

(A) I don't think I would call it a goal of any kind. I didn't really have a specific goal in mind, or at least any goal would be a very open-ended one of just walking and experiencing. I'm not sure if that means that I assume an aesthetic of unknowingness as my starting point, or whether that is the state that I found myself in as the outcome.

When I was writing as a student, I avoided using the "I" in my writing. I could never quite pin down where my discomfort with the "I" came from--whether it was not trusting the persona of confession, or whether it was a fear of revealing myself. But, for many years, it was an approach that I insisted upon. And it was really only in writing this manuscript that the "I" began to appear, to push itself into the narrative despite my efforts. I was always more interested in what was outside of myself, but in the end I could only see what was outside myself by looking out from myself.

How stone is rock and fire
Freedom matching the spread of people
To stars crafting myths to understand
The simple things: first feet
Used to shift the boat's balance
Drifting among the boats."

(L) Does your time in Istanbul, and / or your experience of writing this book guide how you live here now? How you see / experience this city that you currently live in? Does it color your perceptions?

I think *Turkish Dictionary* is, in many ways, a book of orienteering more than mapping...I've been thinking about the difference between mapping and orienteering (**GIVE CITATION** crashing through a landscape without paths, provisioned only with vague bearings and a distant destination—although I'd have to replace the word "crashing" with a word to describe a more thoughtful and gentle movement in your book), and how they seem to be opposites. Maps are prediction; a representation of a particular perspective or imagining of the land / environment; maps can be manifest destiny—stories we tell ourselves in order to justify an enduring sense of right, of superiority, of redemption, even. Orienteering requires a certain embracing of the constantly shifting nature of our environment, and the inability to master the terrain we move through. One must hurl oneself forward towards the edge of comfort and familiarity and accept that any map or iteration of self is insufficient as a guide, that as much as we are compelled to name, know, structure, and orient, we will always fail at that purpose.

But ultimately, we like to tell ourselves stories.

(A) I really like this idea of orienteering as opposed to mapping, especially because my walk through Istanbul in *ATD* avoids the map. In the narrative arc, the I starts in my room, walks through the city, and returns, wandering the entire way. It is only upon returning that I consult a map and realize that I cannot know the route I took. If one has walked through Istanbul, even with a map, this is a common occurrence. Street names change often and are only periodically marked. Everything winds and cuts across itself. End points are obscured by the rise and fall of hills coming between the beginning and end of the journey. What is more useful than a map is often the visual markers that rise above, such as seeing the Galata Tower rise up above the rest of the buildings marking Beyoglu.

And so to orient oneself toward the top of a hill or toward Galata Tower or toward Suleymaniye Mosque, and then working toward that place letting the roads wind you ever nearer.

I'm not sure how this has affected my experience of my current home, now that I've returned to Los Angeles. I've been back here six months now, and I'm still I think re-learning how to live here, how the previous years in Istanbul changed how I see. I think the best way to answer this aspect of the question is just to say that, as sappy as it is, every night I dream **I'm back in Istanbul walking through the city. I do like to tell myself a story.**

And I'm just going to put this here:

If we were able to take as the finest allegory of simulation the Borges tale where the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory (but where the decline of the Empire sees this map become frayed and finally ruined, a few shreds still discernible in the deserts — the metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction, bearing witness to an Imperial pride and rotting like a carcass, returning to the substance of the soil, rather as an aging double ends up being confused with the real thing) — then this fable has come full circle for us, and now has nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra.

*Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or substance. It is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory — PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA — it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire but our own: **The desert of the real itself.***

Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra"

(L) First, your book is so beautiful. I enjoyed the experience of a deep reading of it and have found that it resonates with my book in ways I find really fantastic. I think the similarities are in process and I'd love to talk to you about that some day. But, for now, I'd like to shoot over just a few initial questions to you to start our discussion. Please feel free to focus on the ones that seem to be the most productive and intriguing to you.

Here's a description of my series:

The series is titled *Citizen Cartographer: Autopsies of the Self and the City*, and is inspired by Walter Benjamin's concept of the bio-map. The bio-map is an embodied mapping of the self in the subjectively experienced city that weaves memory and movement over the ever-changing topography of an urban (etc.) space. The concept combines mapping one's city and self: charting the moments and spaces of encounters, loves, longings, and skirmishes that have lodged in the memory.

I feel that a discussion of *A Turkish Dictionary* would be in keeping with the goals of the series. Following are some questions to start off. See what you think and let me know if you'd like to move forward with this. I would list the discussion as a book review and interview, as well, so it would bring some more attention to your beautiful book, hopefully.

