Capitalizing Istanbul: reading Orhan Pamuk’s literary cityscape
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Conclusion

This refracted journey to and through Orhan Pamuk’s Istanbul is a record of the process of discovery and transformation that writing on it entails. At this point, looking backward provides me a different map of the journey, from the one I began with. Given the sharp focus on one writer and his cityscape, I could have expected my own analysis to be sharp and in focus. The opposite happened: there are many Istanbuls in this thesis, as well as a multifaceted portrait of the writer. The city, introduced through its mists, bridges and labyrinths, its past and present, history and melancholy, escapes the mind and resists narrativization. Istanbul and Pamuk are to some extent indistinguishable. Pamuk’s cultural, literary, and political relevance, analyzed through the figures of the bridge and master-writer, and refracted in his own self-portraits, subsist from this blur; Pamuk’s cityscape therefore does not privilege sharpness or focus.

My kaleidoscopic approach finds a counterpart in the numerous changes both Istanbul and Orhan Pamuk underwent during the period I carried out this research. The major transmutation was in the internationalization of Orhan Pamuk and Istanbul. Pamuk’s career peaked during my research with the Nobel Prize and the accolades that followed. His creative output also shifted. He published a novel, Masumiyet Müzesi [The Museum of Innocence] (2008), two collections of essays, Manzaradan Parçalar [Pieces from the View] (2010), and The Naive and Sentimental Novelist (2010), his Harvard lectures. Following the publication of Masumiyet Müzesi, Pamuk’s intervention in Istanbul’s urbanscape took a spatial turn. The novel gave way to an actual museum, due for completion in late 2011, with objects Pamuk commissioned and gathered during the composition of the novel.

In writing this thesis, I also witnessed the unfolding of Istanbul’s official status as a European City. I started this project in early 2006, when Istanbul was a candidate for the 2010 European Cultural Capital; its completion in early 2011 meant that the discussions of
the city’s image and identity seeped into my arguments. Pamuk’s work was increasingly associated with the city; the Museum, first launched as part of the 2010 events and then withdrawn from the campaign, was one instance that refracted the troubled association between the writer and the city.

Istanbul, as this thesis shows, is a product and a site of production. One of the most revealing examples is the most recent. While I wrote this conclusion, the Turkish Prime Minister announced his “crazy” project for Istanbul as part of his election campaign (Jones “Istanbul’s New”). The project includes opening a canal parallel to the Bosphorus to ease the marine traffic and thus to protect its heritage. The most cited part of the announcement was Erdoğan’s resolution to turn Istanbul, the only city with a sea passing through it, into one with two seas passing through it. The project, part of the election campaign, is controversial and only speculative at the moment. Yet, it shows that the symbolism of the city and its heritage are a part of the actuality and politics of the state and nation. My research, from a very different angle, addressed a similar overlap between the politics and aesthetics of the city, and its image as a bridge between various binaries its two shores have come to represent.

Allow me to inject a personal note here, a brief sketch of Amsterdam, the city where I conducted my research. There is a direct link between Istanbul and Amsterdam to be found in the many Turkish immigrants who began arriving to the Netherlands in the 1960s, usually as guest workers. Thus, Istanbul occupies a distinct geographical point, one side of a bridge between East and West. But Amsterdam, with more than one hundred kilometers of canals and 1,500 bridges within the city itself, does not support the image of the city as a unique bridge. The sheer numerical weight of Amsterdam’s many bridges overwhelms the concept and strips it of its symbolic force. In other words, the image of Istanbul as a bridge is complicated when one walks across Amsterdam’s innumerable bridges. Inspired by the locale
of its composition, I sought to multiply its bridges by linking the themes associated with Pamuk’s Istanbul to various literary cityscapes and themes. This study located the literary cityscape at the juncture of multiple binaries: past-present, core-periphery, universal-particular, global-local, and east-west. None of these binaries are neutral. The oppositions they embody shape the matrices of our thinking. I contend, however, that the same framework provides room for maneuver, a way to oppose the power matrices it enforces.

Pamuk’s work steers through these binaries; the tension between the various opposites becomes a productive force to articulate the spaces in between. What starts out as a straightforward contrast between the past glory of a bygone empire and the present sprawl of a teeming city changes with each perspective, drawing from histories unique to Istanbul’s distinctive history and topography, comprising all, and yet reducible to none. In other words, his work intervenes in the image of the city and the binaries associated with both. Rather than discrete, these binaries implicate each other. In turn, my intervention in these binaries and tensions is contrapuntal and kaleidoscopic, aimed at nuancing the details that turn the tensions into lived spaces and inhabited conversations. Seen through the themes that mark this study, these binaries function as pieces in a kaleidoscope, forming a different pattern with each turn of the lens.

The polymorphous, palimpsestic city defies unitary and unified subjectivity. Despite its surplus of images, and the abundance of projects to reshape the city and to reclaim its heritage, Istanbul emerges as a void, a locus of exile and homelessness for reasons that relate both to Turkish and to the city’s cultural history. The void, characterizing the self, Istanbul, and, by extension, Turkish identity, no longer appears as an unfathomable emptiness, but as a space of multiple possibilities. Pamuk’s own sense of “homelessness at home” becomes a transnational marker of identity. Otherness is constitutive of the self, although a specific relation to Istanbul persists. The ‘un-homely’ cityscape challenges viewing, writing, and
reading as acts of cognition, reminding us that narrative is a means of expression in which clarity or consistency may not always be the primary concern.

A question I repeatedly received during my research, especially in Amsterdam was on Pamuk’s European identity, or whether he considers himself ‘European.’ Pamuk himself receives the question regularly, and his creative response is to locate himself in the history of the novel, a tradition he traces from England and France that spread worldwide. Pamuk’s response points toward the constellations that make up Europe and the impossibility to engineer a univocal European identity.

This research opened up a dialogue between Pamuk’s Istanbul and a body of writing on urban experience that especially connects Istanbul with the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary cityscapes of English and French capitals. The aim was to unpack the complex yet accessible imagery of the city. The literary cityscapes of the three capitals are curiously bridged by the imagery of mist and melancholy. The use of these popular tropes of literary modernism further suggests Pamuk’s cityscape works not only with the tradition of literary cityscapes, but also with notions of seeing, knowing, and understanding as markers of an international, rather than a European, literary space. This global turn, with an emphasis on the present network of teeming metropolitan cities, also impacts understandings of Orientalism, raising questions about the tactical uses of binaries. The division between Eastern heritage and Western influence is productive; here, it becomes a resource, rather than a liability. Pamuk uses stereotypical imagery tactically to make it a marker of his work and his international renown, as well as a tool to position both. The city and its writer are positioned on the imaginary divide between East and West, feeding from the tensions between the two.

Pamuk’s work capitalizes Istanbul by multiplying its shores and straddling multiple binaries. These arguments are spread throughout the entire study. Each chapter conveys an
aspect of this imagery before the final chapter defines how his cityscape creates its literary, cultural, and political capital. Pamuk’s Istanbul sets out to be a masterpiece in the sense the character Enishte defines it, as one that “succeeds in changing the landscape of our minds” (My Name 195). The multiple viewpoints Pamuk’s urban imagery offers demonstrate that the landscapes of our minds are also framed by the vantage points from which we define them. His Istanbul condenses the paradox of the mist, collected on a bridge that deconstructs the shores it straddles, but indistinct and blurred when in focus.

Since this thesis can be considered an account of my cityscape through Pamuk’s, I will conclude by quoting him as he explains the role of his cityscape:

Şehrin hikayesini bir bozulma hikayesinden çok bir zenginleşme, güçlenme, darmadağın olma ve şaşırtıcı bir şeye dönüşme hikayesi olarak anlatabilmek isterdim. (1999, “Istanbul Romancısıyım”)

I would like to recount the story of the city not as one of deterioration but as one of enrichment, strengthening, disintegration and as metamorphosis into something astonishing. (1999, “I am a Novelist of Istanbul”)

Istanbul is a phoenix as well as a fictional city; its histories consist of conquest and destruction which lay claim to the site for competing meanings and lifestyles. This city of ruptures and continuities possesses the ability to transform itself in time and survive as part of different traditions. Having traced an extended period of Pamuk’s narration of the city, this thesis ends at the instance where Pamuk’s literary cityscape has become a marker of various forms of capital, embodying different patterns, as well as maneuvers that will emerge from Istanbul’s constant change.