

# Cities Beyond Language: Reading Calvino's *Invisible Cities* as a Travel Narrative

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## ABSTRACT

Published in 1972, Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, written as a travel work, is a fictional and metafictional account of a conversation between Marco Polo, the greatest traveller in the Western world, and an ageing Kublai Khan, the Emperor of the Yuan dynasty in China.

The paper reads the text as a self-conscious meditation on the conventions of travel writing, and examines the relationship between memory and experience, imagination and space, power and representation. The paper also explores Calvino's critical interrogation of the dynamic between discursive practices, power, and the construction of travel narratives.

**Keywords:** *Travel Narrative; Space; Memory; Power; Marco Polo; Kublai Khan*

Italo Calvino began his career writing primarily about the experiences of the Second World War. Calvino enrolled as a student of Agriculture in the University of Turin, Italy, but his education was interrupted when the German forces occupied Italy. Calvino later transferred to the Department of Literature and wrote his dissertation on Joseph Conrad. He was witness to the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany that had a deep impact on his literary and political thinking. After the war, Calvino formally joined the Communist Party, partly because of the political influence of the party in the industrial town of Turin. His early collection of Italian folktales (1959), *Cosmicomics* in 1965, and his experimental anti-novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979), established Calvino as one of the greatest writers in Europe.

Calvino's formal experiments are driven by an awareness and examination of the nature of language, meaning, and the power of narrative. Calvino's interest in hyperreality and metafictionality has led critics to classify him as a postmodernist writer, but his sustained interest in the relationship between discursive and political power is largely overlooked. Though he claimed to be a political agnostic – "I do not have any political commitments anymore, I'm politically a total agnostic, I'm one of the few writers in Italy who refuses to be identified with a specific political party" (Plessix Gray, 1981), as a witness to fascism and a Communist Party member, Calvino's literary and linguistic experiments are not mere aesthetic exercises but reflect his political thinking and expose the filaments of social, cultural, and political power.

Published in 1972, Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, written as a travel work, is a fictional and metafictional account of a conversation between Marco Polo, the greatest traveller in the Western world, and an ageing Kublai Khan, the Emperor of the Yuan dynasty in China.

Structured as a series of ruminations, short meditations, and prose-poems, *Invisible Cities* traces the 'travels' of Marco Polo through cities of desire, memory, and time. Generically diffuse, *Invisible Cities* is at once a travel work, a dialogue, a collection of impressionist essays, and a philosophical tract on the nature of knowledge. Patrick Holland

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and Graham Huggan read *Invisible Cities* as an example of postmodern travel writing. Postmodernist travels are invariably meta-narratives, reflecting on their status as theoretical texts on travel. With the employment of pervasive inter-textual references and citation, such travel writing emphasises the inseparability of travel and writing. In Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, during a fantasy conversation between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, Polo warns Khan: "The city must never be confused with the words that describe it" (Calvino, 1974, p. 61). In this paper, I read the text as a self-conscious meditation on the conventions of travel writing, and examine the relationship between memory and experience, imagination and space, power and representation. Calvino interrogates the nature of power, discursive practices and the construction of a travel text.

A decade before Calvino wrote the *Invisible Cities*, he was commissioned to write a detailed outline for a film on Marco Polo that would blend the documentary and the fantastic. While working on this project Calvino understood that in order to imagine the travels of Polo, it was important to understand the significance of the spectacular in the work. Though the film was never made, he went on to write *Invisible Cities*, a metafictional account of Polo's encounter with Kublai Khan.

The imaginary meeting between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Venetian traveller to the East is actually rooted in historical fact. Calvino is highly conscious of the tradition of medieval travel literature and its relationship with the fantastic. Any study of medieval travel writing will show that "lies" were not proscribed within the convention. The literary echoes of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, tales of Scheherazade in the *Arabian Nights*, and most emphatically Marco Polo's voyages comprise the subtext of *Invisible Cities*. By making Marco Polo the protagonist and the chief narrator of the text, Calvino draws upon the monumental travel work of the Venetian merchant who travelled vast distances of the known world and beyond and produced one of the greatest works of travel literature. Calvino's work engages with the source text and asks fundamental questions about the process of representation and perception of travel.

*Invisible Cities* traces the travel experiences of Marco Polo across fifty-five cities grouped around different themes. The stories of the cities are framed by the conversation between Khan and Polo where Polo tells the emperor about the places he may or may not have travelled to. The conversation between the emperor and the merchant-traveller takes place in the evening that is evocative of the tales of Scheherazade, and also allows for the dream-like, hallucinatory character of the descriptions and tales. Set against the twilight, the stories Polo narrates occupy the blurred space between light and darkness, imagination and fact, memory and forgetting, words and silences. The historically accurate but fictive setting reveals that the cities described by Polo are all versions or iterations of Venice and allude to all cities, real and imagined.

Robert Ryan observes that much of the critical writing on *Invisible Cities* has been preoccupied with its generic uniqueness attempting to situate it within modernism, postmodernism, or structuralist traditions (Ryan, 2016, p. 223). Critics like Carol P James, commenting on the structure of the text suggests that the italicized dialogues between Khan and Polo can be read within the modernist tradition, and the accounts of the invisible cities are postmodernist in tone and intent. While the structural virtuoso of the text is undeniable, Ryan says, formal readings of the work "underdetermines in its own way the absolutely political potential of Calvino's work (224). Ryan's reading exposes the oft ignored – "the specific and radical iterations of resistance" in Calvino. The disjointed, seemingly discontinuous and impressionistic story-telling of Polo challenges Khan's desire for complete knowledge. Khan's totalitarian sovereignty expresses itself in his desire for an imperial control of discourse, language and meaning- "On the day when I know all the emblems", he asked Marco, "Shall I be able to possess my empire at last?" (Calvino, 1974, p. 23).

When Marco Polo arrives in the kingdom of Kublai Khan, the emperor's vast empire was disintegrating, his absolute power was slowly slipping away. The majestic empire had emissaries and ambassadors from other lands- Persians, Syrians, Copts, Turks- and it is in the stories of these foreigners that Calvino says, "only through foreign eyes and ears could the empire manifest its existence to Kublai" (21). Polo arrives in this court and is sent on missions to interpret the kingdom to the emperor. As the Khan's power slowly dissipates, his desires to exert his sovereign control by representational surveillance and total knowledge enhances proportionately. This project is an enactment of what Foucault calls the disciplinary gaze. "In sending Polo to the periphery of the kingdom, Khan attempts to gather, order, and make use of the knowledge that returns" (Ryan, 2016, p. 226).

The initial dialogues between the Sovereign and the traveller are enacted through gestural language and objects as signs. The absence of verbal language forces the emperor to decipher those signs, the meanings of which remain uncertain. But as time passes, the traveller learns the Tartan language, the local idioms, and its tribal dialects. To the emperor, Polo's accounts are now more precise and detailed, yet he realises that the verbal signs perform the same

function as the gestural signs- adding multiple layers of meanings. Though Polo's descriptions of the invisible cities are precise and detailed, they remain elusive, open-ended, treacherous, paradoxical. Describing Tamara, Polo says, "However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may conceal or contain, you leave Tamara without having discovered it" (Calvino, 1974, p.14). Against this ambiguity, Khan seeks empirical certainties- "I have constructed in my mind a model city from which all cities can be deduced...it contains everything according to norm" (69). Khan uses the metaphor of chess to reiterate his desire for absolute control- "If each city is like a game of chess, the day I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire" (121)

Polo's wayward meanderings through terrain, language, and concepts destabilizes the emperor's need for fixed meanings and structural control. By dislodging habitual significations from words, architecture, socialites, and convention, Polo's emphasizes the contingency of meaning-making practices. Polo dismantles the predictable structurality of space, time, and language. As a travel account, *Invisible Cities*, subverts all the foundational generic conventions of travel writing. When Khan talks about the other travellers who tell him about concrete events like- "famines, extortions, conspiracies", he is unsure of what 'knowledge' Polo brings to him. He says, "you return from lands ...and tell me only thoughts that come to a man who sits on his doorstep at evening to enjoy the cool air. What is the use, then, of all your travelling?" (27).

It is interesting that Calvino chooses to pose this question in a text which is based on the greatest of all travels. In 1271, Marco Polo begins his journey from Venice, embarking on a 14-year journey through distant lands, along the silk route, to places that existed in lore and legend. While he was thrown into prison in Genoa, it is said that Polo recounted his journey and experiences to a fellow inmate who transcribed *Il Milione*, or *The Book of Marvels of the World*. Calvino draws upon Marco Polo's travels, who narrated his journeys to Rustichello Pisa from memory. Calvino's narrative is a reflective examination of the role of memory and its function in the production of travel writing. Polo in Calvino's text accentuates this aspect of *Marvels*'s history. And the question the emperor asks about the significance of travel accounts/ stories is one of the most important concerns of contemporary travel writing. In a world which is extensively mapped and effortlessly accessible, what is the function of the travel book?

Edward Said's *Orientalism* discusses the fundamental role played by travel writing in Imperial governmentality. Kublai Khan's desire to 'know' his kingdom through the eyes of a traveller is prompted by his imperial ambitions. While Khan wishes to insistently classify and control the representations of his empire, Polo resists this coercive intent by transgressing the limits of reality, meaning, and substituting 'truth' with relationality, and certainty with contingency. By refusing to present a singular representational framework for his journeys, Polo underscores the disjunction between language and meaning, description and desire, dreams and destinations.

Macro Polo's *Marvels* is monumental work, rich with dense and elaborate descriptions, but Calvino condenses his narrative in remarkably short but intense prose-poems/essays that interestingly follow the intent of the original travels. While the work initially sets up an ideological contest and perspectival dissonance between Khan and Polo, as the text unfolds, the minds of the listener and teller seem to merge. Both work towards producing the concept of an ideal city. Calvino uses the authenticating trope of travel writing by giving detailed descriptions of the cities; their oddities, paradoxes and reversals are narrated with observational acuity, producing a reality-effect. The reader is implicated in the narrative as Polo invites her to survey and visualize what he encounters. The intimacy that the text sets up between Khan and Polo, the traveller and the reader, creates a magical space which invites, implicates, and co-creates landscapes and cities of everyone's dreams and desires.

James Clifford (*Routes*) argues that cultures are not static or fixed entities but are produced by constant movement and intercultural contact. In *Invisible Cities*, Polo emphasizes this mobility of perspective and says, "the traveler's past changes according to the route he has followed" (29). The crucial question the text raises is about the notion of 'elsewhere', the elusive 'otherness' that drives and impels a journey. Khan at one point in the narrative asks Polo why he does not describe his home city of Venice. Polo says, "Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveller recognises the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have" (29). The text amplifies this observation by suggesting that all the cities he describes are versions of his native town Venice.

Though this is true in a literal sense, at a deeper level, it suggests that no matter how far the traveller goes, he/she is never really severed from his culture, context, and perspective. Vaishali Prazmari argues that both Polo's *Travels* and *Invisible Cities* use "psychogeography as a basis for exploration, with Venice as the Ur-city with which other cities are compared, differentiated and evoked" (Prazmari, p.1). Polo describes cities of canals and bridges which are directly evocative of Venice. Polo confesses to Khan that all the cities he knows, are versions of Venice. But when asked to describe Venice, Polo admits that he is afraid of losing Venice by talking about it. Though described with great precision and detail, Polo's accounts of the cities remain elusive and hence 'invisible'.

Calvino's text strategically employs conventions of the fabulous and the fantastical and blurs the distinctions between the probable and the possible. The relational dynamic between reality and the textual, word and the world is central to critical readings of travel writing. The horizon of expectation from a travel work is always historically situated. The expectation of credibility or truthfulness of a travel work is not historically constant. In medieval travel literature, the wonders of the East and the New World were often described in the language of the marvellous or the fantastic. In fact, the success of much travel literature depended on its ability to entertain and stretch the boundaries of the credible. Calvino's book evokes the fantastical in *Invisible Cities* as a critical tool to examine the nature of reality and language, and the power of story-telling.

The emperor had fallen into gloom in the twilight of his rule and Polo's story-telling enlivens the mundane. His travel accounts allow his listener and the reader to re-orient her perspective to visualize, through dreams and desires and memory, the 'invisible'. Kublai Khan knows that his empire is infected and diseased, and asks Polo why he does not tell him of such truths. To which Polo says, "This is the aim of my explorations: examining traces of happiness still to be glimpsed...If you want to know how much darkness there is around you, you must sharpen your eyes, peering at the faint lights in the distance" (Calvino, 1974, 59).

In the final section of the book, Khan sits with an atlas with maps of promised lands yet to be visited or discovered. He asks the traveller what futures await them. Despairing that the "last landing can only be the infernal city", the emperor is beset with a sense of meaninglessness. Polo responds to Khan not by dismissing his premise but offering a challenging but ultimately more rewarding perspective. But privileging vigilance over custom, mobility over inertia, ambiguity over certainty, travel over stasis, perhaps it is possible to recognise that "in the midst of inferno, are not inferno" (163).

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