

ISM Award Winner

## Mnemonic Maps of an Imagined Home: Exploring Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

**Neepa Sarkar**

Assistant Professor

Mount Carmel College, Bangalore

**Abstract:** Deconstructing memories in relation to place and temporality becomes an intriguing exercise as questions on belonging, identity and interrogations of “home” emerge. Poststructuralist and deconstructive perspectives on identity, memory, belonging and sense of place bring about the need to see power structures and hegemony embedded in these notions; making them arbitrary sites of inclusion and exclusion. This paper seeks to explore the linkages between, memory, identity and home in a space-time continuum wherein memory becomes part of a socio-political and philosophical deliberation in search of negotiations to contour and buttress the idea of “home” and self in a global time of living and forgetting.

In this paper, I propose to look at memory as an ideological tool, going beyond its political ramifications to emphasize on its engendering role in the evolution of culture, identity and Being with the help of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972). This novel written as a conversation between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo becomes symptomatic of the culture of nostalgia and its engagement with the concepts of identity, citizenship and the traveller/foreigner. Altering between remembering and forgetting, memory and history, nostalgia and imagination, Calvino foregrounds the function of memory in historiography and the obligations that memories pertain to which need to be recorded and fulfilled.

**Keywords:** Memory, Home, Identity, Belonging, Place

Memory is identity

--Julian Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened Of*

Let us look for a third tiger. This one  
Will be a form in my dream like all the others,  
A system, an arrangement of human language,  
And not the flesh-and-bone tiger  
That, out of reach of all mythologies,

Paces the earth. I know all this; yet something  
 Drives me to this ancient, perverse adventure,  
 Foolish and vague, yet still I keep on looking  
 Throughout the evening for the other tiger,  
 The one not in this poem.  
 --J.L. Borges, "The Other Tiger"

Deconstructing memories in relation to place and temporality becomes an intriguing exercise as questions on belonging, identity and interrogations of 'home' emerge in present times. Poststructuralist and deconstructive perspectives on identity, memory, belonging and sense of place have brought out the need to see power structures and hegemony embedded in these notions; making them arbitrary sites of inclusion and exclusion. Contemporaneity sees globalization seeking the blurring of boundaries and establishment of the "global village" where identities are no longer territorially marked. Re-emergence of ethnic conflicts and nationalist tendencies challenging the notion of the "world citizen" put the discrepancies inherent in the discourse of globalization into focus. This new identity in a globalised space cannot entirely do away with the importance of memory and land. One may speak of the global space superseding the collectivity that is nation and bringing forth perhaps a space devoid of any regional association. However, globalised space cannot be a post people and post memory space.

Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) in his *Social Frameworks* (1925) talked of the ways socially organized transmission in the form of oral traditions, historical accounts and memoirs, images, photographs and actions not only influenced but also affected and transmitted memories. A rather enthralling opinion presented by Halbwachs regarding the transmission of memories was the role of space as a medium for it. If Halbwachs's mentor, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) had talked of time as a social construct and temporal locator of things which occur in social, everyday life; Halbwachs through an emphasis on space brings in the significance of the mnemotechniques devised during the ancient times. The discovery of this mnemotechnique is associated with Simonides (556 B.C.-446 B.C.) who developed the art of memory and the technique of "memory palace." It is a way wherein things to be remembered are mentally associated with physical locations and is one of the earliest associations and linking of memory

with place. The advent of modernism brought in the Bergsonian conceptualization wherein memory became symptomatic of an intuitive and imaginative grasp of time and interpretative renderings of the notion of self. This gets further explored by Italo Calvino in his novella *Invisible Cities* (1972) giving us a past and a present which remain both compliant and ductile in this fantastical depiction. According to Marco Polo, “it is not the voice that commands the story; it is the ear” (Calvino 35).

Memory unlike history, is not to be categorised or theorized, but simply make its subjective, spontaneous albeit chaotic nature be felt through the prose of Calvino, much like that of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1955). The plot revolves around meetings between an aging Tartar emperor Kublai Khan and young Marco Polo who has been asked by Khan to regale him with accounts of cities that lie within his vast realm and empire. Polo tells him about cities of delight and desire, cities tinged with regrets, vibrant cities, cities that defy logic and time, cities made of dreams and overtime, and broken dreams. Captivated but skeptical of the traveller’s tales, the emperor, probes and jousts with Polo, during all their exchanges; only to be eventually revealed by Polo that each of his descriptions may be reflections of his home--Venice. “Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice ... Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little” (Calvino 78). The novella resembles a prose poem and is a reordering of the emotional and philosophical reverberations of our civilized world and our human condition. Every interlude between Khan and Polo becomes a thought experiment about powerful structure-empires, governments, languages, lands and tales. “Only in Marco Polo’s accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termite’s gnawing” (Calvino 5).

Calvino goes on to create a literary mnemonic map with its own myths through the novella and a specific idea bound to a spatial temporal locus emerges. The play of history and memory enmeshes quite successfully in the novella as the various constructions and reconstructions that enable and disable them through time are brought forth. The rhizome theory put forward by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) becomes appropriate to Calvino’s fiction and helps readings and interpretations of the text to move beyond, giving the reader a perspective that heterogeneous

comprehensions may be preferred in a postmodern world of multiplicity but somewhere the singular universality of a memory based identity and outlook remains. Deleuze and Guattari outlined the theory based on the morph-like ability of the rhizome where the rhizome is seen as non-hierarchical, multiple, heterogeneous and devoid of a centre. A rhizome tends to resist structures of domination, is anti-genealogical and indulges in cycles of “deterritorializing” and “reterritorializing.” The novella gives another meaning to representation for it nudges the readers to a method of signification wherein meaning does not remain enclosed in historical circumstances entirely:

“I have constructed in my mind a model city from which all possible cities can be deduced,” Kublai said. “It contains everything corresponding to the norm.” “I have also thought of a model city, from which I deduce all the others,” Marco answered. “It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions.” (Calvino 61)

As the novella shows, the city of Venice becomes an identity marker and reference point for Marco Polo in the novella as he tries to define himself and his home in various ways through other imagined cities. Aleida Assman tells us that to think about memory one must begin with forgetting and in *Invisible Cities* we find that has been Calvino’s purpose precisely besides incorporating post-modernist perspectival tendencies onto a modern discourse of identity, memory and place. Through his personal memories of angst, separation and existential crisis, Marco Polo posits his longing for Venice, a city and home that he has to literally leave as he travels. This singular memory which becomes intertwined in all his descriptions of different cities he has seen; becomes not just a lived and sometimes hidden experience but a “jouissance” in the face of change. Using interesting anecdotes and descriptions, Calvino very deftly captures the categorization of belonging and being the perpetual “other”/foreigner in the cities that one temporarily resides. Anticipating Pamuk’s *huzun* for Istanbul, Calvino becomes a precursor to this feeling of overwhelming nostalgia and melancholy for people or place who/which might never return. Unlike nostalgia, which is always linked to the loss or being apart from “home,” melancholy doesn’t derive itself from homelessness; and instead evokes feelings of loss regarding that which once was beautiful. This is a different kind of displacement that Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities* faces unlike those who have been forcefully displaced, exiled or voluntarily migrated; it’s a cultural and emotional displacement. The novella evokes, at once, feelings of

estrangement as well as existential questions, which resound with the prevalent notions and significance of the linkage between memory and identity in a post modern and global world:

Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and if you approach, it changes. For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it and never leave. There is the city where you arrive for the first time; and there is another city which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name; perhaps I have already spoken of Irene under other names; perhaps I have spoken only of Irene. (Calvino 112)

The construction of the idea of home linked to memory is developed throughout the novella; a travelogue filled with descriptions of imaginary cities evoking the sublimity of time and the self. A nostalgic memory drenched in temporal loss is what we find in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, a mnemonic longing glimpsed in Marco Polo's descriptions of his travels to Kublai Khan. Ultimately memory becomes a temporal intermesh of knowing, remembering and a deliberate forgetting affecting the being and psyche in a descriptive, enclosed topography. For Patrick Hutton, history becomes the linking factor between memory's points of "repetition" and "recollection" and carries forward the past into a better understanding of the present. The function of memory in historiography becomes significant and the obligations that memories pertain to need to be recorded and fulfilled. With the advancement in technology the connection between memory and oblivion becomes more entwined and transformed.

Influenced by J.L. Borges, Calvino too in *Invisible Cities* investigates the art of storytelling and the role of the writer as well and emphasizes the role of nostalgia in a changing global culture trying to make sense and interpret the ways of living in globalized times. In the course of his discussions with Kublai Khan, Polo, in the novella describes a series of metropolises, each of which bears a woman's name, and each of which is radically different from all the others. The descriptions of these fifty five cities are arranged in eleven groups in Calvino's text: Cities and Memory, Cities and Desire, Cities and Signs, Thin Cities, Trading Cities, Cities and Eyes, Cities and Names, Cities and the Dead, Cities and the Sky, Continuous Cities, and Hidden Cities. These cities characterized by propinquity, like Foucault's heterotopia, become for the writer a way to map and write memory into a reality reminiscent to the self. Zaira consists of relationships

between measurements of its space and the events of its past; Melania, cities of the dead where everybody has numerous roles; Armalia, forest of pipes, taps, showers, without buildings; Tamara, where citizens do not see things but its images. Euphemia, “the city where memory is traded at every solstice and equinox” (Calvino 31), and Zobeide, which was found by men of various nations having an identical dream. Leonia, a city where residents pursue consumerism to its logical extreme, daily throwing out goods to make room for new items while trash forms vast and indestructible landscapes. All become multiple ways as well as paradoxically, a singular way of investigating one’s history, sense of belonging and truth to address the essential idea of “home.”

Peter Washington maintains that *Invisible Cities* is "impossible to classify in formal terms." But the novella remains an exploration, sometimes playful, sometimes melancholy, espousing the powers of imagination, fate of human culture, and the elusive nature of storytelling itself. As Kublai speculates, "perhaps this dialogue of ours is taking place between two beggars named Kublai Khan and Marco Polo; as they sift through a rubbish heap, piling up rusted flotsam, scraps of cloth, wastepaper, while drunk on the few sips of bad wine, they see all the treasure of the East shine around them" (Calvino 104). Calvino provides specific information about the strategies that Marco Polo and Kublai use to communicate with each other, initially. Before he learned Kublai’s language, Marco Polo “could express himself only by drawing objects from his baggage—drums, salt fish, necklaces of wart hogs’ teeth—and pointing to them with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder or of horror, imitating the bay of the jackal, the hoot of the owl” (Calvino 18). Even after they have become fluent in one another’s languages, Marco and Kublai find communication based on gestures and objects immensely satisfying. This becomes a poststructuralist commentary on language and its arbitrary conferment of meanings to words, as cities become text and metaphor for language, not fixed but palimpsests of past forms superimposed. “Kublai thought: ‘If each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains’” (Calvino 109).

Calvino tells us:

In Esmeralda, city of water, a network of canals and a network of streets span and intersect each other. To go from one place to another you have always the choice between land and boat: and since the shortest distance between two points in Esmeralda is not a straight line but a zigzag that ramifies in tortuous optional routes, the ways that open to each passerby are never two, but many, and they increase further for those who alternate a stretch by boat with one on dry land. And so Esmeralda's inhabitants are spared the boredom of following the same streets every day. (120)

Calvino's expression of a Borgesian worldview finds itself condensed in the many cities described by Polo in the novella. The passages in italics in the novella are narrated in the third person, with the dialogue of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan in quotes except from the seventh section where they appear as *dramatis personae*. The omniscient narrator fades into the puzzling mnemonic algebra of the *Invisible Cities*. Calvino lets the readers negotiate the labyrinthine way through the book, traversing historical epochs and maps, creating a strange urban space that seems to shape, to construct an impossible architecture of desires, dreams and memories.

The narrative structure is not homogeneous as well as it does not allow the reader to search for a centre, or a consolation for some sort of unifying meaning, indicating and defeating the cartographic and structuralist tendencies to order, categorize and name. The city of Esmeralda is full of narrators, perspectives, lines, alleys that an absent presence tries to subsume under its hierarchical model. Passersby are immersed in the tangled streets of Esmeralda, with infinite narration or, on the other hand, with infinite possibilities of reading their routes (so there is no repetition). Esmeralda resembles our contemporary disjointed sense of space and place, the loss of the dimensional mechanics of ancient Greek geometry (old world order), conformity in unity, entity and symmetry. Thus, Esmeralda anticipates this crisis of representation and its fractured bond to memory and identity; rejecting the possibility of an omnipresent narrator as well as the meaning situated in the central square. Swallows flying over Esmeralda, dominate "from every point of their airy paths all the points of the city" (Calvino 80).

The instruction on how to move around Esmeralda may at the same time suggest how to read Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. It cannot be a narratology with its roots in structuralism, in an overly structural schematization of texts, a drive to universalize and essentialize Esmeralda's urban

design, a constant tendency to conceive an essential universal scientific or divine grid of its streets and squares. Calvino's Esmeralda opposes narrative theory that constructs the space of the text as a unitary, homogenous space, determined by whatever constant: "the shortest distance between two points is not the straight line but a zigzag" (Calvino 80). The rhizome, like the routes of Esmeralda, is reducible "neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes two or even directly three, four, five, etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added (n+1)" (Deleuze & Guattari). A parallel reading of the rhizome's characteristics and an intrinsic web of *Invisible Cities* reveals many similarities: any point of a rhizome can be connected to or must be connected to any other, as though imaginary city plans flow into Marco Polo's account or Kublai Khan's remarks, or an invisible narrator; in the rhizome just as in *Invisible Cities* there are no points or positions, since multiplicity never allows itself to be coded; points of fixed meaning in *Invisible Cities* are eradicated by constant contradiction within each or on the whole Atlas; a rhizome can be broken off at any point and reconnected following one of its lines ("in the seed of the city of just, a malignant seed is hidden" [Calvino 132]); rhizomes as cities are in a state of constant modification; no one can provide a global description of the whole rhizome, as Kublai Khan could not master his Empire by an abstract system of signs; "“On the day when I know all the emblems,” he asked Marco, ‘shall I be able to possess my empire, at last?’ And the Venetian answered: ‘Sire, do not believe it. On that day you will be an emblem among emblems.’” (Calvino 19). Finally, the map of the rhizome as *Invisible Cities* is connected to the maps of promised lands, of the summation of all the cities into one, but not by hierarchy. As Calvino tells us that utopia cannot be a fable enclosed in only one possible narrative, in any grand-narrative of modernist manner. It might be becoming in the present, yet its map constantly changes its colours, its borders, its explanation. That is Polo's answer to the Emperor who asked to "which of these futures the favouring winds are driving us":

I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them. If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop. Perhaps while we speak, it is rising, scattered, within the confines of your empire: you can hunt for it, but only in the way I have said. (Calvino 144)



Calvino's novella becomes an elaboration of individual longing with regard to self and identity as it gets lost to time. Consequently there is also the imperative to reclaim that which has been lost to time. In Calvino, the city becomes a semblance of the metaphysical landscape, conceived to bridge the gap between material and immaterial dimensions of the construction of the self in place and time. Cities are constantly transforming themselves, like languages, from the cosmological centrality of ancient cities to the perspective of the Renaissance individual composed in the universe, to the social, functional space of modernism, to the postmodern conception of urban fabric as fragmented, a "palimpsest" of past forms superimposed upon each other. "You have given up trying to understand whether, hidden in some sac or wrinkle of these dilapidated surroundings there exists a Penthesilea, the visitor can recognize and remember, or whether Penthesilea is only the outskirts of itself. The question that now begins to gnaw at your mind is more anguished: outside Penthesilea does an outside exist?" (Calvino 142). Calvino also addresses the politics of cartography for memory, an important component of identity, that has been moulded by maps and cartography. Erasing old thought systems of identification, it carved out new lines and borders, so powerful in conception and existence that they influenced the cognitive capabilities of an individual, a whole community and the world. "Marco Polo states ... 'travelling, you realize that differences are lost ... your atlas preserves the differences intact'" (Calvino 125).

Perhaps the more the novella tends toward the multiplication of possibilities, the further it departs from that singularity and unicum which is the self of the writer, his inner sincerity and the discovery of his own truth. But Calvino asserts in an interview: "Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopaedia, a library, and inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and recorded in every way conceivable." This novella gives a glimpse to a Platonic understanding of memory and identity in a fast transforming world and its associations. Remembering in this text becomes a philosophical and existential interrogation into the nature of self (transcendental as well as political) and like Plotinus, Calvino too looks at the empowering role that memory bestows to the soul, individual and collective. Delving into issues of othering, stereotyping and naming, the novella stands out as a metaphysical manifesto of an imaginative understanding of mnemonic, place-based identity and

the psychical associations of space and mind in the construction of self and perhaps even the being; giving it a purpose even in seeming chaos: “seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space” (Calvino 148).

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