LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Benjamin Linder, Editor (2022) *Invisible Cities and the Urban Imagination*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 365 pp., £129.99, ISBN: 978-3031130472

Cities have long-fascinated thinkers and storytellers alike. In literature they have figured, amongst others, as sites of promise, beauty, immersion, temptation, despair, and decay. Take for instance Henry James's moody depiction of a rain-soaked Venice in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902):

> It was a Venice all of evil that had broken out for them alike, so that they were together in their anxiety…a Venice of cold lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption, with the people engaged in all the water-life huddled, stranded and wageless, bored and cynical, under archways and bridges (403).

Here a dismal, wintry Venice reflects the amoral values and ruthless desires of James's characters and their pursuit of money and power. James's vivid depiction of Venice brings to mind Italo Calvino's poetic rendering of the city in *Invisible Cities* (1972). Venice has a prominent, if nebulous, place in Calvino's chronicle — as Marco Polo says to his interlocutor Kubla Khan: 'To distinguish the other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice' (78). This famed Italian city of canals and bridges looms over all others in Calvino's text, with its labyrinthine waterways and streets that reflect the intricacies of memory and desire. The influence of *Invisible Cities* is far-reaching — it has informed the fields of literature, architecture, geography, philosophy, cultural studies, and sociology, to name but a few. Its fifty-year anniversary has inspired this new volume of work, *Invisible Cities and the Urban Imagination* (2022). It is a book that embraces the interdisciplinary, visionary character of Calvino's text.

Paralleling *Invisible Cities*, this new volume provides multiple perspectives on the theme of cities. The design of Calvino's book is evoked through a composition that addresses the topic of cities across three sections: 'Cities & Theory', 'Cities & Cities' and 'Cities & Practice.' Evocative again of Calvino's poetic, *Invisible Cities and the Urban Imagination* moves between the abstract realm of ideas and the physical world of built spaces. Editor Richard Linder suggests that the volume's chapters cannot be structurally bounded: 'Just as in Calvino's text…these

externally imposed categories—meant to instill coherence, order, and flow—nevertheless cannot contain the rich diversity of the chapters themselves' (19-20).

The variety of chapters engage with, and evolve from *Invisible Cities* and include considerations of current dangers that threaten urban life—in particular, global pandemics and climate change. For instance, Mark Purcell's 'Invisible Cities: Learning to Recognise Urban Society' and Rachel Prentice's 'Invisible Cities and the Work of Storying the Future' acknowledge the impact of Covid-19 and global warming upon the contemporary city. Interestingly, Calvino—whose parents were both botanists—was deeply concerned with the environmental impact of cities too: 'The crisis of the overgrown city is the other side of the crisis of the natural world' (181). It seems that Calvino was quite prescient in anticipating the dire environmental consequences of the ever-expanding metropolis.

A remarkable chapter by Lianne Moyes – 'Queer Cities, Bodies & Desire: Reading Nicole Brossard Alongside Italo Calvino' – identifies a contradiction at the heart of *Invisible Cities* whereby women are 'part of the very structure of the city' and yet are 'at the same time, absent from it' (73). Moyes corrects this absence by reading *Invisible Cities* alongside Nicole Brossard's *French Kiss* (1974), thus enabling a productive dialogue between these experimental texts. But what is perhaps most impressive about Moyes's contribution is the observation that Calvino's book dramatises a homosocial exchange between Marco Polo and Kubla Khan:

> In *Invisible Cities*, portraits of cities are tokens of exchange between men, the textual and material ground of the relationship between Marco Polo and Kubla Khan. The scenario of one man describing to another man cities with the names of women is reminiscent of the relations analyzed by Gaye Rubin (1975) in "The Traffic in Women" and by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) in *Between Men*. (74)

The female names of cities operate as 'tokens' of exchange between the male narrators, Polo and Khan. This reinforces Kosofsky Sedgwick's own point about homosocial desire and how it is enabled through women's intermediary existence. Even though women only exist as names (or ideas) in *Invisible Cities*, this is precisely the point: their physical absence and symbolic presence sustains Polo and Khan's connection. Male-to-male desire (and this does not have to mean sexual desire) is facilitated by the concurrent absence and presence of women.

Another notable chapter, Sophia Psarra's '"The Void not Filled with Words": The Role of Venice in Invisible Cities', offers a polished and beautifully assembled contribution. Psarra's exploration of Venice's significance in Invisible Cities provides a meticulous response to Calvino's maze-like poetic. Venice is imagined as both a written and 'unwritten' world (111) that has been traced by authors and explorers, most notably Marco Polo who always returns to this city 'at the end of his travels' (98). The unique architectural and geographical features of Venice, along with its literary renderings, are explored through various maps, drawings, and mathematical equations. The detail and dazzle of the designs in this chapter capture the geometry and whimsy of both Polo's 'native city' (98) and Invisible Cities itself.

There is much to recommend in this volume: each of its twenty-seven chapters (including an introduction) provide lively interpretations of and interventions into Invisible Cities. What is perhaps most impressive is that many of the contributors go beyond the European grid — Vanika Arora's eye-opening exploration of Nepal's Bhaktapur and Derek Pardue's study of the teeming metropolis that is Brazil's São Paulo are noteworthy examples.

It is also worth mentioning Regev Nathansohn's 'Invisible Smart Cities', a chapter that imagines utopian and dystopian digital spheres that are underpinned by omnipresent technologies. Nathansohn suggests that Polo and Kahn's 'desire for absolute knowledge about material and social life in cities' (293) reflects the far-reaching data systems of 'smart cities.' The desire for 'absolute knowledge' no doubt comes at a cost, as one's own privacy is likely sacrificed. Nonetheless, the invisible technologies that sustain 'smart cities' come close to realising the epic scale of Calvino's vision as digital algorithms preserve, enact and predict our dreams and desires.

Invisible Cities and the Urban Imagination's thirty-two contributors come from such disciplines as ethnography, architecture, anthropology, urban design, art history, literature, philosophy, sociology, and theatre studies. Such an array of perspectives testifies to the far-reaching effects of Invisible Cities as well as to the imagination of these contributors, all of whom offer fresh insights on Calvino's classic text. Ultimately, what is most gratifying about this volume is that it pays tribute to Invisible Cities while simultaneously developing and augmenting for modern-day readers the social and aesthetic value of that unforgettable literary masterpiece.

Works Cited

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