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The Poetic Forms of Cities in Eleven Labyrinths

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THE POETIC FORMS OF CITIES
IN ELEVEN LABYRINTHS

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Senior Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

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"But, what is to be kept in, and what out? Then, [an everyday urbanism] needs to know the city beyond the powers of cognition, venturing into the realms of poetic invocation and sensory intimation. –Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*

"What line separates the inside from the outside, the rumble of the wheels from the howl of the wolves?" –Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

1. Introduction

I have had a suspicion for a long time that my interest in cities and my interest in poetry are related. This essay is what has emerged from my search for a connection between the two.

In my studies and in my experience of cities, I have come to realize that they cannot be defined. Each is unique and can't be reduced to a word, a category, or a story. Cities are chaotic; they always grow in unplanned ways. They cannot be captured, only their details enumerated. The most interesting cities are not the ones that are given a rigid structure by people, they are the ones that seem to grow as if by their own will. For me, poetry is the form of writing and the form of thinking that can match the form of cities. Poetry is not based on rules, it is based on uncertainty and confusion, and learning to be at home in a chaotic world. It cannot be defined, just as cities cannot be defined. A poem defines its own form, and there are limitless arrangements of its words and images, just as there are limitless arrangements of people and buildings in urban society. In trying to accurately represent different forms of cities through writing, I have chosen poetry, which is equally fractured and mysterious.

I have also identified Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* as a novel that tries to mirror the nature of cities in its form and content, and this essay focuses mainly on the ways in which it does so. *Invisible Cities'* value is literary, philosophical, theoretical, and poetic all at once, and this essay does not try to separate these accomplishments, but instead shows how they are interrelated. Calvino writes imaginatively and beautifully, without ever diminishing the seriousness of his mission to engage deeply with cities, which always seems to be his priority. Though he wrote *Invisible Cities* in 1972, Calvino's fictional cities still have many lessons to teach us about the form of cities and the form of their representations. In the chapters that follow, I will give a close reading to several of

Calvino's cities that I find to be particularly well suited to inform a discussion about the ways in which we can represent and conceptualize cities creatively.

I would like to give a brief background description of the major texts I am drawing from. First, and most important, is *Invisible Cities*. *Invisible Cities* is divided into nine numbered parts and fifty-three descriptions of cities (usually one or two pages long) within these parts. Each city has a name and some kind of unusual or surreal characteristic that belongs to that name. There are eleven titles which organize the cities: 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 titles alternate in a pattern that changes over the course of the book and relate to the nature of the city described. For example, the first section of this essay focuses on Aglaura, which is the first city categorized under "Cities and Names," and is a city whose inhabitants lack a vocabulary to articulate the reality of their city, and are thus imprisoned in the past. They are focused on the *name* "Aglaura" rather than how it manifests.

At the beginning and end of each of the nine numbered parts, there is an italicized section about the narrator of the imagined cities, the famous Italian traveler Marco Polo, and his listener, the great Mongol emperor of China, Kublai Khan. Khan relies on Polo to bring the cities of his empire lucidly into his imagination, so that he can understand the way his empire functions and thus possess it more fully. Although each of Polo's descriptions claims to be a unique city, as the book progresses it becomes apparent that Polo is really only examining different aspects of his home city, Venice. His stories are meant to challenge our belief in the existence of cities as singular entities, as Polo's city contains multiple cities within it. For Polo, as well as for Khan, there is neither a

universal nor a unique city; the city is merely a form by which different aspects of human existence rise and fall. It is specific only in the sense that it is a specific arrangement of interchangeable parts, comparable to a specific position on a chessboard. Polo and Khan's discussion of the city-form will be further examined in the last section of this essay, "Polo Vs. Khan: The Chessboard."

Another integral work to this essay, which is especially important to the first section about the city Aglaura from *Invisible Cities*, is *Metaphors We Live By*, by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. This text studies metaphor as a way to approach the way we structure language and truth through our everyday speech. Metaphor, for them, is not merely a matter of linguistic study or poetic ornamentation; it is an epistemological structure by which we order everyday concepts and create new understandings.

To speak of cities, we must be attentive to the ways we construct them metaphorically, and the way our experience of cities informs these constructions. This essay draws from Lakoff's and Johnson's theory of metaphor as a link between imagining cities and experiencing them, and argues that the ways in which cities exist in the imagination are inseparable from the ways they are experienced. Although no single metaphor can be used to fully describe a city, their flexible structure can more accurately describe major trends within cities.

I will also draw on two works of urban studies: *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, and *Everyday Urbanism*. Both advocate for a fresh approach to urban studies, one that looks to the everyday patterns of life as a way to make the city legible. These works represent postmodern theories that argue that cities are fluid, fragmentary, multiple, and processual entities, and work to debunk the modernist fiction of the city as singular and plan-oriented. While *Everyday Urbanism* includes chapters from different writers who

present the everyday city in creative ways, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* is more theory-based.

Also crucial to the mission of this essay is the poetic lens through which I approach these texts I have enumerated. It is my belief that the urban theories I discuss are enhanced and clarified through a poetic approach. Calvino demonstrates this rare talent—to use a poetic/literary quality to embody deep intellectual thought in a way that is both pleasurable and necessary for the project of urbanism. I have included my own poems at the end of this essay, in the hope that they will inspire the reader to think about cities as Calvino does—both intellectually and poetically.

With this goal in mind, let us now turn our gaze to Calvino's cities, and let each be our teacher:

2. Aglaura: The Void

What would a city that resists a metaphorical identity look like? It would probably be much like Aglaura, a difficult city to express, as Marco Polo explains in *Invisible Cities*:

There is little I can tell you about Aglaura beyond the things its own inhabitants have always repeated: an array of proverbial virtues, of equally proverbial faults, a few eccentricities, some punctilious regard for rules…Perhaps neither the Aglaura that is reported nor the Aglaura that is visible has greatly changed since [ancient times], but what was bizarre has become usual, what seemed normal is now an oddity, and virtues and faults have lost merit or dishonor in a code of virtues and faults differently distributed. In this sense nothing said of Aglaura is true, and yet these accounts create a solid and compact image of a city, whereas haphazard opinions which might be inferred from living there have less substance. (Calvino 67)

Without the proper words, or rather, without the proper metaphorical structure in which to place their words, those who try to describe Aglaura can only repeat a basic and rigid definition of what Aglaura has been said to have been in the past. This definition amounts to a few basic qualities: some proverbial virtues, faults, and eccentricities. The meanings that are attached to Aglaura in this description are fixed. Cities, however, always change; people, infrastructure, capital, and ideas flow through cities can never be still. This flux occurs both over time and in an instant seen from different perspectives, and Aglaura is not exempt from this phenomenon. However, in Aglaura there are no reports of such change, the conception of the city stagnates because of its dedication to presenting a "solid and compact image of the city" rather than a haphazard one based on actual life there. The distribution of virtues and faults has shifted in Aglaura, but the fear of admitting that Aglaura is something complex and fluid causes its inhabitants to cling to a "solid and compact image of the city, no matter how far that image is from reality. No one in Aglaura can know an updated reality of city life because no one is able to venture into metaphorically inventive territory.

As a result of this imaginative impoverishment, Aglaura is closed off from its own reality. It exists only as a name, as it is an abstract entity with no imaginative weight and no basis in experience. Aglaura's inhabitants are unable to represent their city in an

imaginative way, and are thus doomed to experience it as its rigid and anachronistic definition. Cities that we can imagine in a more rich, complex, and inspired way are not only more vivid to the imagination but also provide a more realistic representation of the city. Furthermore, such representations are able to re-present themselves—they can constantly be expanded to include new realities of the city. This plastic descriptive stance is characteristic of a strain of thought in urban theory called "everyday urbanism," which draws from the mundane fragments of everyday life to understand the city, rather than attempting to produce a static, and purely theoretical overview of cities. Margaret Crawford writes, in her introduction to *Everyday Urbanism*, "We instead [of seeking a totalized city] acknowledge fragmentation and incompleteness as inevitable conclusions of postmodern life. We do not seek overarching solutions. There is no universal everyday urbanism, only a multiplicity of responses to specific times and places" (Crawford 13).

Aglaura, however, exists only in its universally received definition. No subjective account of it is possible, because all the qualities intrinsic to it are thought to have been already accounted for. There is no chance for fragmentation, or multiple identities, or change. It has been defined in a way that is completely rational but has no grounding in the living phenomena of the everyday city. As Polo explains in *Invisible Cities*, the real Aglaura sometimes penetrates this dated definition, but people there have no method by which to describe it, and thus cannot give it existence:

> So if I wished to describe Aglaura to you, sticking to what I personally saw and experienced, I should have to tell you that it is a colorless city, without character, planted there at random. But this would not be true either: at certain hours, in certain places along the street, you see opening before you the hint of something unmistakable, rare, perhaps even magnificent; you would like to say what it is,

but everything previously said of Aglaura imprisons your words and obliges you to repeat rather than say (Calvino 67-68).

The actual manifestation of a city is never colorless; it is always a rich sensory experience, by virtue of the change that is always occurring within it. The inhabitant of Aglaura senses this, but is unable to access the intensity of urban experience. Their struggle is one of representation, specifically of written and spoken representation. In the introduction to *Cities: Reimagining the Urban,* Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift cite this lack of terminology as one of the main difficulties in understanding cities: "Often we do not have the vocabulary to make the everyday life of the city legible; so much seems to pass us by" (Amin and Thrift 5). They urge us to look to the neglected spacialities of the city as places that offer the potential to open up the invisible reality of everyday life. These spaces have been normalized in the collective mind, but also have the potential to become new again if they are represented in an inventive way. Furthermore, Amin and Thrift advocate the use of metaphor as a way to go beyond a purely theoretical or purely sensory understanding of the city (Amin and Thrift 9).

The structure of metaphor, which Lakoff and Johnson call "imaginative rationality" (Lakoff 193) is the key to opening up an understanding that can change and expand over time, which is an understanding cities demand (a lesson learned by the stagnant Aglaura). Lakoff and Johnson study the way in which everyday uses of metaphor in our speech reveal the structure by which we conceptualize what we talk about. They conclude that metaphor has the power to define reality, especially social reality, and that new metaphors can structure new truths, and thus, new realities.

To get a handle on the way metaphor is used in our everyday language, let us look at some examples of everyday speech from *Metaphors We Live By* that support the metaphor "Theories/arguments are buildings":

> Is that the *foundation* for your theory? The theory needs more *support*. We need some more facts or the argument will *fall apart*. We need to construct a *strong* argument for that. I haven't figured out yet what the *form* of the argument will be…The theory will *stand* or *fall* on the *strength* of that argument. The argument *collapsed*…So far we have only put together the *framework* for our theory (Lakoff 46).

These highlighted examples are used so commonly to describe theories that we forget they were originally used to describe physical structures. The link between them has been established over time. As Lakoff and Johnson explain, no metaphor can exist outside of experience, and no experience can be had that is not culturally defined. What we call "direct physical experience" always actually takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions (Lakoff 57). Furthermore, our cultural presuppositions can be traced through our metaphorical structurings. This means that our common linking of "building" and "theory" through metaphor is neither a coincidence nor an inherent truth. It speaks to how we conceive of both buildings and theories in our society.

The ability to understand "theory" in the terms of "building" shows that theory is not a fixed concept; like the concept of "city" (and unlike Aglaura), it is open to new, unexpected description. "Building" is able to enhance our knowledge of "theory" because, by equating the two, their similarities are highlighted and their differences are ignored. Because a building has a foundation and is constructed, a theory too can have a foundation and be constructed. Part of what "theory" means to us actually depends on qualities inherent to buildings. Our experience of buildings as solid structures designed

with a specific form and that stand alone in this form fits our idea of what a theory is. By giving theory a physical form that is based in our material experience, it is allowed to expand as a concept and by taking on physical qualities that reveal its imagined nature. A theory can be strong or weak, it can collapse, and it can find new forms, just as a building can. "Theory" is not a purely abstract concept; part of it given embodiment through metaphor.

It is in this intermesh of reason and imagination where metaphor excels. Lakoff and Johnson call the intermesh an "experiential synthesis" of objectivism and subjectivism (Lakoff 192). In the scientific world of objectivism, objects and the words used to describe them have fixed meanings, and they exist in a reality where things can be said to be objectively true or false. Objectivism believes that a definitive account of reality can be given through precise methodology. Subjectivism, on the other hand, believes feelings and perceptions shape all experiences; only subjective intuition can express each person's unique experiences.

The experiential approach synthesizes these two viewpoints to allow for the imaginative rationality of metaphor. In this approach there are truths, but they are not absolute; they are relative to our conceptual system, which is always shifting and expanding through metaphorical associations. Metaphor is grounded in precision, but it is not immobile. New realities can be formed within it, but these new realities are always based in experience, which entails a mental and physical interaction with the world. Metaphor is a precise representation that reveals reality through imaginative description. The experiential approach turns out to be highly related to our understanding of cities as mobile, metamorphosing entities. Like the structure of metaphor, the ever-expanding

connections and associations within cities ground our understanding of cities in experience, but never in fixed truths.

Turning our attention back to Aglaura one last time, we realize that not only do the people there lack the vocabulary to describe their city, they lack the vocabulary to truly experience it. All the wonders and terrors of Aglaurian life pass by unnoticed; everything that is rare or new materializes only in an instant of hallucination before it transforms into something common and familiar. Everything that exists, then, becomes invisible, hidden by the mask of certain and unchangeable things. When the upstanding Aglaurian looks to find that the baguette in his hand has turned into a knife, perhaps he will start to talk of the things that are really happening in Aglaura, and the city will start to move once again.

3. Zobeide: The Dream and the Labyrinth

Calvino's Zobeide is a city whose foundation is desire, specifically the desire to possess a fleeting and imaginary entity. It is also a city whose physical features embody its foundational principles. Marco Polo explains,

> [The streets] tell this tale of its foundation: men of various nations had an
> identical dream. They saw a woman running at night through an unknown city;
> she was seen from behind, with long hair, and she was naked. They dreamed of
> pursuing her. As they twisted and turned, each of them lost her. After the dream
> they set out in search of that city; they never found it, but they found one another;
> they decided to build a city like the one in the dream. In laying out the streets,
> each followed the course of his pursuit; at the spot where they had lost the
> fugitive's trail, they arranged spaces and walls differently from the dream, so she
> would be unable to escape again. (Calvino 45)

The dream that draws people to this city is of particular importance to *Invisible Cities* and to the study of urbanism. In order to describe the multiple nature of cities, which always exceeds definition and cannot be reduced to static models, Calvino uses the apt metaphor of the dream. In the conversation between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan that precedes the story of Zobeide, Calvino writes,

> With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even
> the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear.
> Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their
> discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and
> everything conceals something else. (Calvino 44)

For Calvino, the truth that the city is multiple is obvious. Every chapter of his book is concerned with a different city, though as the book progresses it becomes apparent that the narrator of the stories, Marco Polo, is really elaborating on different elements of his native city, Venice, as if they were distinct realities. Polo is able to speak of each imaginary city as if it really were a city because Venice really does contain all these possible realities within it; each is a dream with a unique logic that reveals an aspect of the city. These multiple perspectives are what everyday urbanism thrives on. As Margret Crawford writes in *Everyday Urbanism*,

> Cities are inexhaustible and contain so many overlapping and contradictory
> meanings—aesthetic, intellectual, physical, social, political, economic, and
> experiential—that they can never be reconciled into a single understanding.

Urbanism is thus inherently a contested field. (Crawford 8)

If we can conceive of a city as containing overlapping meanings, then we can understand Polo's mission of description. Khan wants Polo to exhaust his knowledge of all the cities in his empire, but to do this, Polo draws instead from multiple understandings of a single city. These understandings are fragmented and can be contradictory, but together they approach a more complete understanding, which is an understanding of the fragmented and contradictory nature of reality. In this sense, the "city is a dream" metaphor allows us to conceive of a knowledge of cities that is like a knowledge of our own subconscious: phenomena within our dreams are clues to a deeper desire or fear, just as phenomena in the city suggest an invisible order that is being upheld. In the case of both the city and the dream, the deeper cause of phenomena often seems inscrutable.

Everyday urbanism argues that we must look to the banal practices and repetitions of life in cities to approach the secret thread that strings together the dream. As Crawford writes, "The utterly ordinary reveals a fabric of space and time defined by a complex realm of social practices—a conjuncture of accident, desire, and habit" (Crawford 8). Our places of work and leisure, spaces of infrastructure and maintenance—places so ordinary that they escape our attention: this is where the secret discourse of cities hides. This is where the forgotten desire or fear that originally brought a space into existence can be revealed. The dream city that runs parallel to the real one has been forgotten in these spaces and wants to be revealed. In Zobeide, this ordinary place is the streets.

The story of Zobeide says that the original founders forgot the purpose of their city's labyrinthian streets. The streets become merely the location where they go to work everyday, with no connection to the dream woman, who they never seen again. The

streets become ordinary and mundane to them, so they cannot see the desire that is embedded within their design.

Zobeide is a city where Amin and Thrift's concept of "production of the ordinary" (Amin and Thrift 103) is supreme. For Amin and Thrift, the great regulating technologies of the "machinic city" produce a sense of ordinariness in our everyday lives. Though humans create these systems, and theoretically control them, the control that these devices exert on us is often equal to our own. Signs, for example, (business signs, street signs, directional signs, stop signs, etc.) determine the actions we make everyday, though we believe these actions to be ordinary, in reality they are restrictive. Signs tell us how to drive, what streets to walk down, what to buy, what to eat, whom to interact with, and more. The *technologies* that regulate experience are key to understanding the processes the produce what we think to be ordinary in the city.

At the end of Calvino's story about Zobeide, new men, who have also dreamed of the elusive woman, come to Zobeide and redesign it so that the woman will not be able to escape at the point where she did in their dreams. They cannot understand what drew the original settlers to Zobeide, "this ugly city, this trap" (Calvino 46). They do not understand that they too are creating a trap out of their blind desire to possess the woman. Though their intention to trap the woman was the same as the original founders, both groups are equally blinded. They do not realize that their desire for this woman will lead them to build an equally ugly and prison-like city. The ugliness of their desire becomes the ugliness of the built environment.

In many ways, the men who founded Zobeide are much like the heroic modernist urban planners of the past. Modern urban planning has valued the plan of the city above all else. The modernist plan is not flexible to the needs of people; it is based on

principles that are less chaotic and unpredictable than people are: rationality and functionality. The modernist plan for the city is not for people as they are, it is for people as they *should* be: rational actors who function perfectly in a city that is perfectly designed. The lesson Zobeide teaches us, however, is that designs that are based on principles thought to be more important than human experience (like an obsession with possessing a dream woman), end up functioning in unexpected ways.

Cities that have been entirely planned in the modernist style from the top down, such as Brasilia, have demonstrated the ways in which space that is officially designated for a particular use comes to be used in unintended ways. Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, was designed in 1957 primarily by Lúcio Costa, with many public buildings designed by Oscar Niemeyer. It was constructed in 41 months. The city is designed around large avenues which divide space up into designated use sectors, which are meant to fulfill all aspects of city life in a orderly and rational way. It also was built in the shape of an airplane, which one can only see when flying above the city in an airplane. It is a city designed for an aerial photograph or a map, not for people; it is a façade, albeit an architecturally beautiful one. Like Zobeide, Brasilia is designed around a single dream, and that dream is fixed in the physical landscape and is unwilling to change. There are many other grand modernist projects that follow this trend. One other example is the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects in St. Louis, which were designed to provide all necessary amenities to its inhabitants, but rapidly degenerated into slums, and were demolished.

The multiple and fragmented dreams of people in cities are suppressed by spaces like these; people are unable to wander through a city that changes and surprises them. The excitement of new and changing space is lost and the processes that generate new spaces are stifled. Like the people in Aglaura, who did not have the vocabulary to

describe their city, those who believe in a fixed design of a city will not be able to imagine the new arrangement of spaces that occurs over time. Their spatial vocabulary is limited by their belief in a rigid and all-encompassing design.

In contrast to the modernist model of city planning is the metaphor of city as labyrinth. The labyrinth is used to show the city as a place of wandering—a place intended to disorient. In this way, it is a postmodern theory of the city, one that argues that the city is a fragmentary, fluid, dreamlike entity. Like dreams, the labyrinth contains a secret order that is hidden in randomness and uncertainty. One who is inside the labyrinth believes his world absurd and unplanned. The design of Brasilia is a labyrinth too; though its design may seem rational from an airplane, one who wanders Brasilia at the human scale does not meticulous design that is obvious from the air. The fact that Brasilia was constructed to look like the shape of airplane doesn't matter to the Brazilian who is late for work. As Brasilia shows us, the labyrinth is always already all around us; there is always a design to cities, though in some it may be shifting like a dream. It is important that the urbanist constantly update their conception of the order that structures urban life. The labyrinth made of the signs that determine our movements and the walls that set both physical and mental boundaries; it is made of zoning codes, of businesses, of streets and sidewalks and forgotten alleyways; it is made of each of Calvino's invisible cities too; and it is also made of much more, as the labyrinth is inexhaustible.

The labyrinth also becomes the world of the poet. This is evident in Fanny Howe's essay on "poetics of bewilderment." For her, bewilderment in life is ubiquitous, and language must come to terms with the dream-like confusion of life's structure. By this logic, she deems life in the labyrinth a "concession to bewilderment," a place "to learn about perplexity and loss of bearing" (Howe 15). For Howe, the poem mirrors the

labyrinth's structure. The poem is a cyclical entity; it is a spiral that circles what is impossible to pin down or make explicit. Poetry is a method of searching and wandering in dreamlike time and space in order to be at home in bewildering experience. The poem's approach to events and observations "is not sequential, but dizzying and repetitive" (Howe 18).

Poetry, then is a way to produce and inhabit the same kind of bewildering, complex, and fluid space that a city is made of. In this way, each poem can be thought of as a kind of city, which further reveals and updates the changing spaces of cities. To make each poem reveal bewildered space is a goal of mine as a poet, which I also believe to be related to my fascination with cities. Part of the goal of the poetry I have supplemented this essay with is to actually create bewildered spaces for the reader to inhabit, rather than forcing the reader to only analyze them from afar.

At the center of bewilderment poetics is what Howe calls "the nomadic heart," which is the organ that allows the wanderer to move along with the invisible world that also moves. The nomadic heart allows one to move from labyrinth to labyrinth gracefully, with the knowledge that the discovery of one laybrinth's secret propels one into an even greater labyrinth. The nomadic heart is the heart of the poet, who is destined to spiral, and it is the heart of Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities,* who wanders from imaginary city to imaginary city, and is in reality only circling his beloved Venice, which grows more and more perplexing as he delves deeper into its nature.

It is also the heart of Bejamin's flâneur, a character who emerges from the labyrinthian city. For Benjamin, the flâneur is the wanderer of the modern city, the man of the crowd who is always observing the changing flows of the city. The flâneur has the

spirit of an poet, and the city is his muse. Benjamin writes a fragment of meditation

about Baudelaire and his relationship to prostitution in the city. Baudelaire was a

flâneur-like figure for Benjamin, a poet who dwelled in the labyrinth and wrote about it:

> With the emergence of big cities, prostitution comes to possess new arcana.
> Among the earliest of these is the labyrinthine character of the city itself. The
> labyrinth, whose image has become part of the flâneur's flesh and blood, seems
> to have been given, as it were, a colored border by prostitution. The first
> arcanum known to prostitution is thus the mythical aspect of the city as labyrinth.
> This includes, as one would expect, an image of the minotaur at its center.   That
> he brings death to the individual is not the essential fact. What is crucial is the
> image of the deadly power he embodies. And this, too, for inhabitants of the
> great cities, is something new. (Benjamin 166)

The flâneur learns to be at home in the labyrinth; he possesses the nomadic heart

Howe writes about. He learns to take pleasure in what he stumbles across and note how

things change in the city. The ordinary, for the flâneur, is the new; the order of city life

must constantly be updated. At each moment, he allows himself to be swept away by a

new possibility that arises in the labyrinth. He learns the labyrinth's structure, and he

knows that there is always more labyrinth to be revealed.

Those who do not wander, but instead have linear goals, to which the labyrinth is

an impediment, cannot appreciate the wonder of the labyrinth and all the possibility

contained within it. They have memorized their path through the labyrinth. They cannot

wander as the flâneur does, and as a result the labyrinth has become fixed for them. It

has become a trap; nothing new can be found within it.

In writing, as in the city, the labyrinth is a symbol of multiplicity. Benjamin's

flâneur is fascinated by all the forking paths that are available to him; each represents a

separate future for him. The poet too loves to be lost in the multiplicity of the labyrinth.

It is a place where metaphor realizes its potential to expand perceptions of reality,

because in the labyrinth every reality has infinite variations. Two unlike things can be

equated in the labyrinth, just as they are equated through a metaphor. In his story "The Garden of Forking Paths," Jorge Luis Borges uses the labyrinth as a symbol to convey the infinite multiplicity that is possible in life and in writing:

> In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates all others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. He *creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves proliferate and fork. (Borges 26)

Ts'ui Pên's novel is an enormous maze whose last page is the same as its first, and like the city, has the potential to continue indefinitely. Ts'ui Pên's novel is reminiscent of "megacities" like Sao Paulo, that have urbanized surrounding areas to such an extent that it is difficult to even know where the city ends; to the urban wanderer it seems to go on forever. In cities like these, the line between the potential and the real is blurred; what seems potential at one moment becomes real the next. The labyrinth makes known this infinite potential for life within cities. As a labyrinth the city becomes impregnated with an invisible richness—its infinite potential realities exist invisibly on top of it. All the cities that could exist *do* exist in the labyrinthian city, waiting to make themselves manifest.

We ask the labyrinth: where does the dream end and reality begin? And the labyrinth replies: reality is just one dream among many. Here we can realize the labyrinthian nature of Calvino's project. In many ways it is inspired by The Garden of Forking Paths, as all Polo's cities are only forking paths in the garden of Venice. These forks must be navigated as Calvino and Borges navigate them—with a wandering heart that respects the infinity and mystery of the labyrinth—or else one will become trapped like the inhabitants of Zobeide: in a labyrinth that is so fixed and inescapable that it seems ordinary.

4. Chloe and Ersilia: Lines

In talking about experience and interaction in cities, we often speak of connections between people, between ideas, and between cities. But what is really *between* two connected things? There is at once a similarity, an attraction, and something mysterious shared between two things. The bond between two things often evades any kind of logical explanation. But no matter how mysterious, there is a symbol that gives existence to any connection: the line.

The line is one of the most basic and ubiquitous symbols. There are lines in your hand; there are lines in the letters of this essay; there are lines to guide traffic in the street; there is a line where my floor meets my wall. It is merely a length between two points, without any width. Lines are one of the primary ways in which we make sense of the world. The outline of an object helps us differentiate it from another; we measure distance in lines; we understand straightness in lines; we connect points with lines. The

line is the *between* that connects things no matter how big or small or complex or simple they may be.

In Calvino's city named Chloe, lines function as imaginary connections between strangers. The lines of Chloe represent possibilities for interaction—futures where two people come together and their fantasies of interaction play out. Calvino describes a street scene in Chloe where people with contrasting physical attributes and identities encounter each other in the street:

> A girl comes along, twirling a parasol on her shoulder, and twirling slightly also her rounded hips. A woman in black comes along, showing her full age, her eyes restless beneath her veil, her lips trembling. A tattooed giant comes along; a young man with white hair; a female dwarf; two girls, twins, dressed in coral. Something runs between them, an exchange of glances like lines that connect one figure with another and draw arrows, stars, triangles, until all combinations are used up in a moment, and other characters come on to the scene: a blind man with a cheetah on a leash, a courtesan with an ostrich-plume fan, an ephebe, a Fat Woman. And thus, when some people happen to find themselves together, taking shelter from the rain under an arcade, or crowding beneath an awning of the bazaar, or stopping to listen to the band in the square, meetings, seductions, copulations, orgies are consummated among them without a word exchanged, without a finger touching anything, almost without an eye raised. (Calvino 51)

As many invisible lines run throughout cities as visible ones. When two people pass each other in the street of Chloe, an invisible line runs between them; it symbolizes the potential connection with another person that is instantly felt, but not yet made real. Despite all these possibilities for interaction, it is rare that any interaction actually occurs. So while there is an intense desire for connection that pervades Chloe, it is, in reality, "the most chaste of cities" (Calvino 51). People share fantasies of "meetings, seductions, copulations, [and] orgies" silently in Chloe, without even knowing that they are sharing them. Chloe's invisible world of fantasy is overrun with lines of potential interaction that constantly appear and disappear as people go about their everyday business.

As a parable of urban life, Calvino's description of Chloe is highly relevant today, as societies, especially urban societies, become increasingly dependent on information as a vital resource. Our reality is largely constructed by information; symbols and images proliferate faster than physical objects. Furthermore, physical objects become overlaid with so many symbolic meanings that they become mental processes. Experience, then, becomes mostly artificial, or at least abstracted (Melluci 1-2).

This abstraction of experience is at the heart of what we see today as the rise of virtual space. In video games we are able to inhabit other bodies in other places at other points in time. We can construct our own identities in virtual space and interact with other constructed identities using social media. We can use video cameras and microphones to video chat with each other regardless of physical distance. When we are connected in virtual space, the connection is more of a mental one; information serves as a virtual substitute for immediate experience. With this substitute we can view representations of each other on our computer screens and feel connected. We are more often than not, satisfied with a substitute for reality when it is more convenient or enjoyable. The invisible connections of Chloe also exist in a kind of virtual space, where people can act out their desire for each other without making themselves vulnerable in real space.

In both Calvino's cities and in real cities, the invisible world is a current that reflects the visible one. Both worlds shape our experience and they are never completely separate. Our Facebook profiles inform our social interactions in physical space. Advertisements on T.V. affect our conceptions of physical products. Though Chloe's physical world stimulates a vibrant imaginary one, people there are too afraid to make their imaginations manifest in the real; the connection is only one-way. Though they feel

possibility everywhere, they remain limited by their shy bodies and the self-imposed

rigidity of their routines. Connection exists there only on the virtual plane.

Another of Calvino's cities that expresses an aspect of connection is Ersilia. In

Ersilia, connections are made explicit by strings that connect two things and are a specific

color to signify a type of relationship between those things:

> …the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of the houses, white or black or
> gray or black-and-white according to whether they mark a relationship of blood,
> of trade, authority, agency. When the strings become so numerous that you can
> no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave: the houses are dismantled;
> only the strings and their supports remain.
> From a mountainside, camping with their household goods, Ersilia's
> refugees look at the labyrinth of taut strings and poles that rise in the plain. That
> is the city of Ersilia still, and they are nothing (Calvino 76).

In Ersilia, the line ceases to be an imagined symbol. Unlike Chloe, which has

only invisible connection, Ersilia's connections are only visible ones. The virtual space

that allows for improvised and changing relations between things is made non-existent in

Ersilia. Amin and Thrift describe the importance of "spaces of flow," as spaces of

"continuous improvisation in which the 'in-between' of interaction is crucial…[Spaces of

flow] are best described, therefore, in terms of a language of forces, densities, intensities,

potentialities, virtualities" (Amin and Thrift 81). This kind of space, where improvised

connection is free to adapt over time, is clearly missing in Ersilia. Ersilia is weighed

down by its connections, which have no virtual existence, and thus cease to flow.

It is clear that the proliferation of symbolic connection in cities is too great for

physical manifestation. Connections must remain invisible or they will strangle the city,

as they do to Ersilia. Imagine if every text message, phone call, and internet connection

left a mark on the world! We would all be swimming in an ever-flooding ocean of lines,

unable to distinguish reality from unreality. As in Ersilia, the city would exist more, and

we would exist less. In the end, the connections in Ersilia become so fixed and

overwhelming that they are abandoned, and they continue to exist without anyone to give

them life. The refugees of Ersilia continue to exist also, without any connections to give

their lives relational meaning.

Connections occur in a balance between physical and abstract space. As Calvino

teaches us, if we take away either aspect of connection, the "improvisational flow" Amin

and Thrift describe is lost. We are either stuck, overwhelmed with the limitless

possibility of connection and unable to experience physical connection, or else we are

uselessly trying to solidify connections in the physical world that are always expanding

and changing in the abstract one. Connection is a key part of our interaction with the

city. As the city is both a physical and abstract entity, connections to it must also occur

in both physical and abstract space. As a symbol, the line gracefully represents the nature

of connection as both a physical and abstract phenomenon. It exists both conceptually

and tangibly, and can exist no other way.

5. Polo vs. Khan: The Chessboard

The chessboard emerges as a metaphor from the beginning of Marco Polo's and Kublai Khan's relationship. Calvino writes about how Khan employs foreign ambassadors who cannot speak his language to report on the remote provinces of his empire. From their incomprehensible languages Khan is able to draw out important facts about the cities they describe to him. When Polo arrives from Venice as the newest (and most foreign) ambassador, he takes this foreign communication to its next level. Unlike the other ambassadors, he is "totally ignorant of the Levantine languages" and can only express himself with "gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings and hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsacks—ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes—which he arranged in front of him like chessmen" (Calvino 21).

These first chessmen form the language that is most appealing to Khan. They are symbols that express what Polo believes to be a city's essence. Each is a fragment of urban life that point to the complex web of processes in that city. As more enigmatic symbols, Khan is forced to resort to a more imaginative process to interpret them. Khan must think of these symbols metaphorically if he is to draw out their meaning. As we have seen in *Metaphors We Live By*, a metaphorical structure is the key to an

understanding that is both imaginative and rational. As metaphors, Polo's objects are

both precise and flexible descriptions; because they are based in experience they can

change as experience changes. At the same time, Polo's metaphors retain their

exactitude; they equate one thing with another, but they do so in an imaginative way that

leaves room for both the city and its description to react to each other. It is no

coincidence that Khan finds this form of communication the most effective and enticing.

It turns out that the kind of expression which Polo is compelled to use as a

foreign mind describing the cities to their emperor is also poetic: "one city was depicted

by the leap of a fish escaping the cormorant's beak to fall into a net; another city by a

naked man running though fire unscorched; a third by a skull, its teeth green with mold,

clenching a round, white pearl" (Calvino 21-22). These are specific and evocative

images, but they become *poetic* because of their power as metaphors. The images draw

their power not solely from within themselves, but through what they represent: the vast

and complex network that composes a city. Because a single image is chosen to be

emblematic of an entire city, every occurrence in that city tries to find a way to be

embodied by that image. As the image and the city find more ways to relate, their

metaphorical bond is strengthened.

My interest in poetry and my choice to include it with this essay has a lot to do

with this special kind of metaphorical connection that deepens as more attention is given

to it and as more life experience can be applied to it. Poetic connections are an ever-

expanding web. *Invisible Cities* exhibits this expanding web of connection so beautifully

that it is hard to ignore as a poet. At the same time, it is a highly intellectual work, and I

believe it is a key example of how a poetic quality can be utilized to express intellectual

thoughts more powerfully.

In Khan's pursuit to master the cities of his empire (for what else does an emperor

have to do?), Khan eventually shifts from using Polo's images to using the chessboard as

a means to express the essential qualities by which his cities exist. He still attempts to

possess his cities, but rather than trying to know them all, he tries to understand the rules

by which they exist. Khan starts to play chess with Polo using standard pieces instead of

found objects. Khan believes the standard pieces to be simpler and more pure symbols;

because they are more abstract, they are more able to encompass every phenomenon of

the city, or so he believes: "a queen could be a lady looking down from her balcony, a

fountain, a church with a pointed dome, a quince tree" (Calvino 121). Khan studies the

game and the various positions of the symbols in relation to each other, always relating

them to forms of cities, in attempt to gain access to the essential qualities that dictate their

existence. Each position of the pieces is a cityscape, and the game itself is the model that

arranges the components of the city. The game becomes the framework by which cities

come to rise and fall:

> Contemplating these essential landscapes, Kublai reflected on the invisible order
> that sustains cities, on the rules that decreed how they rise, take shape and
> prosper, adapting themselves to the seasons, and then how they sadden and fall in
> ruins. At times he thought he was on the verge of discovering a coherent,
> harmonious system underlying the infinite deformities and discords, but no
> model could stand up to the comparison with the game of chess. (Calvino 122)

Knowledge of his empire is contained within the patterns of the game, the

movements of the pieces, and the rules by which the pieces are allowed to interact. And

yet, despite the discovery of what Khan believes is the perfect metaphor—the one that

mirrors his empire exactly in symbolic form—Khan feels like he possesses a complete

knowledge of his cities. Although the game of chess represents the invisible order of

cities, no theory can be drawn from it, only innumerable games of chess played. A theory, as Lakoff and Johnson would say, must be structured by lived experience, which Khan lacks when he thinks about the city as a game of chess. Khan has, at once, both a complete understanding and an utter confusion about cities—all knowledge of their forms can be derived from chess, and yet, nothing can really be said about them besides a game of chess.

Unlike Polo's images, which were evocative and based on everyday objects found in the cities he visited, the chess pieces are too conceptual to be effective. In Khan's chess games there is no interplay between experience and concept, and thus, the concepts lose their meanings. Whereas Khan could once imagine the travels of Polo, he can now only view the shifting of concepts on a chessboard—he sees the order, but there is no means by which to give it life. The chess pieces, which began as a way to draw a strong connection between a singular object and a set of complicated processes, have lost sight of the everyday experience they were once made to represent.

Khan's chessboard reveals, once again, that there can be no fixed representation for the fluid experience of the city. Like the repetitive and outdated stories people in Aglaura tell about Aglaura, like the strings used to signify connections in Ersilia, and like the streets that are disconnected from their initial intent in Zobeide, the chessboard is unable to capture the flows of the city. It is too abstract. A rich and accurate description of these flows must be more like the initial objects Polo used to represent different cities. They must have a metaphorical structure that can change over time, and they must be grounded in everyday experience.

Khan, in trying to understand the invisible order of concepts, finally reaches a

point of disillusionment—he cannot live in a completely abstracted world and must return

to the world of things:

> At checkmate, beneath the foot of the king, knocked over by the winner's hand, a
> black or a white square remains. By disembodying his conquests to reduce them
> to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive
> conquest, of which the empire's multiform treasures were only illusory
> envelopes. It was reduced to a square of planed wood: nothingness… (Calvino
> 123)

It is Polo who brings Khan back to the world of things, and consequently back to

the physical manifestation of cities. The abstract aspect of cities turns out to always be

dependant on the physical forms in which cities manifest. It is only when both abstract

and physical aspects exist together that the city can be experienced:

> Your chessboard, sire, is inlaid with two woods: ebony and maple. The square
> on which your enlightened gaze is fixed was cut from the ring of a trunk that
> grew in a year of draught: you see how its fibers are arranged? Here a barely
> hinted knot can be made out: a bud tried to burgeon on a premature spring day,
> but the night's frost forced it to desist…The quantity of things that could be read
> in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai; Polo was
> already talking about ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down
> the rivers, of docks, of women at the windows… (Calvino 131-132)

It is only when the chessboard exists once again as a piece of wood that it can

regain its purpose as a metaphor. Though the games of chess are inexhaustible, like the

city is, nothing is capable of embodying a city except the city itself. When the

chessboard regains its existence in the physical realm, it can once again be related to the

city, which also needs a physical/spatial realm. The chess game is both like the design of

Zobeide, which has lost its imaginative aspect, and like the connections of the people in

Chloe, which have lost their physical aspect. It can have either aspect, but never both. As

a symbol of the city it can represent either the infinite possibility of abstract arrangement,

or the material world where these arrangements manifest, but it cannot serve as a metaphor for both; it is either too abstract or too concrete.

6. Conclusion of Essay, Introduction to Poetry

As Calvino has shown us, metaphors like the line, the chessboard, the labyrinth, and the dream, add to our understanding about the way cities can exist. My hope is that my essay has enriched your understanding of how both cities and representations of cities exceed definition. New theories, like those articulated by everyday urbanism, acknowledge the shifting and expanding arrangement of cities. These theories make explicit what artists who study cities already suspect.

I do not believe there is a fixed meaning attached to any poem. I do not believe that rational thought can exhaust a poem, and I do not believe that any explanation can accurately describe a poem. Like cities, poems exist by their own rules. I can tell you that these poems were inspired by this essay and by *Invisible Cities*, but I cannot tell you what they mean. All I ask is that you bring yourself to these poems and try to inhabit them as only you can.

7. This Is All Happening In One Room

He who lives in fragments
He who lives between the blinds
and is a holy bridge
of certain geometry—

knows there is no more space—
only people who squeeze themselves
until they are bricks.

The Invisible Killer asks,
"Why don't you blow more wind through your poem?"
and The Architect replies,
"Because my window is closed and it's
painted shut."

When silence is violent
it drops one's ear to the ground
it raws one's cheek
with a sidewalk

When is silence violent?

The Bum: "Now bring that bottle
over here, it's time for me to cry."

Who has made it out today
 to survive
under the static of robotic skies?

The Bum turns his automatic eyes to you
it's your turn to die with dirty hands

*The great regulating technologies of the "machinic city" produce
ordinariness in our everyday lives.*

The Invisible Killer is:
elusive to the end.

8. Up and Down

Skyscrapers out of smoke
with dark peaks view
an unmoving performance.

Under the sewer grate
she looks up
as you look down.

"I think I've been here before," whispers
The Architect.

Now she stands at the base of a shadow-pyramid
looking up
as you look down
feeling like the American Sky.

Policemen sway
disoriented around
a sunflower.

Are they blades of grass?

The single seed rolls in the wind
laughing at the size of the sky
fixing to die,

crushed between church bells
and the sound of bone on concrete,
where the Invisible Killer
resides—

Everything that is new materializes only in an instant
of hallucination before it transforms into something common and familiar—

It is only among the audience of buildings
and their many-eyed scrutiny
that one discovers the lightness of concrete.

9. In and Out

He who sleeps inside the old factory
and lives on a corner pile of grains
is the Minotaur
and you, with your fear, must learn
your way around his labyrinth.

Or become one of the innumerable heaps
of modern life in a great city.

It is easy to become lost
on ground that is no longer
ground,
but is a map
that The Architect tells you needs to be redrawn
to look more like the ground.

Why does no one applaud when bone
hits concrete?

You climb to the top of the garden wall
look down,
then jump, thinking you're free.

You've just entered another labyrinth.

"What a terrible world,"
thinks The Mathematician
"with harmony after harmony
projected onto my soul,

how absurd,
a world that swells with dead images
and is infected with the human spirit,
which I cannot seem to resolve

and how at home I am,"
thinks the Mathematician,
"wandering through
these infinite hallucinations."

The proliferation of symbolic connection is too great for physical manifestation. It must remain invisible
or it will strangle the city.

You rip off your clothes
at the moment when you finally
feel alive
but your skin is translucent and
already you're a ghost.

10. Ghosts at Noon

Expression, rhythm, mass, coherence!

The heart too
is dizzying and repetitive.

The Business Man, during his lunch break
is overcome, by the stench of the sewer?
             by the pressure of the sky?
             by the little hole in his suit
             (which must not exist)?

At noon, when the jaws of concrete clench,
when the sun withdraws all shadows and catches concrete
in a lie, the hungry mouth of silence is seen
for what it is.

"I like you better this way,
immobile" says The Sculptor, as he examines his work.
It's The Business Man's replica in concrete.

Tender without his facade,
The Business Man feels he could melt into the street
and stretch for miles.

The Business Man's suit is draped over the dumpster's wall
he's searching concrete cracks
for secrets. "Don't tell my boss," he whispers,
"I can get high from the smell of the sewer
feels like my ears are leaking
I like it
want to make those walls blink
blink!
I think I might be endlessly beautiful—"

You ask the labyrinth:
"Where does the dream end and reality begin?"
And the labyrinth replies:
"Reality is just one dream among many."

The ghosts are all exhausted.
The sun is so hot and
there's nowhere soft to sleep.

11. Dead Branches

Kublai Khan sees blood
dripping down the palace walls.

The sores of the street
grow infected.

Enough! Tell me another
city, he commands.
His lips are
pale and his slender
fingers clenched.

Through opium smoke he sees
skeletons; thousands of eye sockets
scour concrete cracks
for squirming bits of flesh.

Kublai Khan spins
on a pointed toe—
his finger grazes
the garment of a ghost.

The ghost-smell of this place
disgusts Kublai Khan.

Dreams pass him
with robotic precision.

"How many times must I watch myself die?"
asks Kublai.

The nomadic heart is the heart of the poet, who is destined to spiral.

Futures not achieved are only
branches of the past:
dead branches.

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