



Subjective Maps, Dense Cities: Literary Cartography and Urban Futures in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

Arnab Dasgupta

Ph.D Scholar, Presidency University, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

This essay investigates the rhetoric of cartography in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, reading the dialogue between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo as a postmodern critique of Enlightenment cartographic rationality and its will to control space. It argues that Kublai's desire for exhaustive, algebraic maps of his empire re-enacts the Renaissance and imperial fantasy of a perfectly transparent, homogenous spatial order, while Polo counters this paradigm through what Calvino terms the "subjective urge": a mode of mapping grounded in memory, estrangement, and misunderstanding rather than exactitude. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping, the paper shows how Polo's "map of memory" situates individual experience within an unrepresentable urban totality, offering a cartography of alterity that acknowledges what the traveller will "never have." Through close readings of cities such as Zaira, Tamara, Esmeralda, and Phyllis, the article examines how Calvino figures urban space as temporally and spatially dense: a locus where events, histories, and signs accumulate and exceed any single representational grid. The discussion mobilises Marie Beville's work on urban mapping and otherness, Roland Barthes's notion of the city as discourse, Aldo Rossi's theorisation of the city as a "theatre of human events," and Friedrich Kittler and Paul Virilio's accounts of infrastructural networks to demonstrate the city's resistance to linear, structuralist mapping. Finally, through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, the paper proposes that Calvino's literary cartography models a non-hierarchical, multilayered way of mapping cities as living, proliferating assemblages rather than static, legible objects.

Keywords: Literary Cartography, Cognitive Mapping, Urban Imaginaries, Rhizomatic Space, Subjective Mapping.