

Invisible Cities and their name(s): insights into the (in)correctness of names

Abstract

The central argument of this article is that the underlying theme of the five reports entitled *Cities & Names* in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is the fundamental inadequacy of names to signify cities. By challenging the taken-for-granted, common-sense idea that a name of a city corresponds to a well-defined urban entity, Calvino implicitly suggests that different cities cohabit under the same name and that fundamentally names of cities are semiotically incorrect. The article is divided into two parts. The first expands on ideas about the correctness of proper names that since being presented in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* have prevailed in western thought. The second part consists of five commentaries on the deceptive conflation between a city and its name that runs through the five reports included in *Cities and Names*.

Keywords

Italo Calvino • Invisible Cities • cities and names • inadequacy of names • *Cratylus*

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The use of names, Socrates, as I should imagine, is to inform: the simple truth is, that he who knows names knows also the things which are expressed by them.

Plato, *Cratylus*

A persistent theme of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is the dissonance between the visible and invisible cities, between the experiential and the abstract, and notably, between the "unrealizable promise of stability and the challenge of relentless transformation" (Cavallaro 2010, p. 70). Throughout the book, and especially in the reports that share the title *Cities and Names*, Calvino calls attention to the inherent tension between the ostensibly permanent and stable reality of names and the city's elusive existence as a multiplicity of cities in space and in time: a city mentioned by name consists of an assortment of possibly discordant cities – or perhaps different versions of the same city? – that share the same name, implying that the name of the city is inherently incorrect since it projects stability and coherence where none exists.

Arguably the most important socio-linguistic phenomenon (Jaynes 1976, p. 135), a name conjures up a presence in the world (Ryan 2001, p. 128). Importantly, a name makes it possible to recreate an object – a person, an animal, a place, a ship, a galaxy, etc. – in its absence (Ryan 2001, p. 136). The fifty-five 'invisible' cities reported in Calvino's *Invisible Cities* are all mentioned by name.

At one level, the city names mentioned "are 55 beautiful female names that sound like an incantation when read out loud one after the other" (MayOwl 2020). In a letter from 1982, Calvino explained his choice of names for cities based on their phonetic relevance (Calvino 2000, p. 1491). Liza Venuti and Gian Paolo Guidicetti (2010, p. 370) assert that "the names of the invisible cities are not arbitrary... the(ir) onomastic and textual sense often agree," meaning the mythological and poetic associations between city names and the cities they designate.

Yet, at another level, Calvino employs the names in a critical inquiry into how cities and their names correlate. In this article, I argue that the underlying theme of the five reports entitled "Cities and Names" is the actuality of an unavoidable discord between the name and the city it designates. In Ruth Dunster's pithy formulation (2010, p. 90), Calvino's emphasis in these reports is on "Forms of falsehood – the inadequacy of names." By subverting the notion that there is a one-to-one correspondence between a name and the city it purports to designate, Calvino challenges the taken-for-granted, common sense idea that a name of a city corresponds to a well-defined urban entity. Whereas, in common parlance, a name often doubles as the object it designates, Calvino suggests that different cities cohabit under the same name. In this sense, the name of a city is semiotically incorrect.

The discussion that follows is divided into two parts. The first expands on ideas about the correctness of proper names that, since being presented in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, have prevailed in western thought. The second part consists of five commentaries on the theme of the ostensibly fundamental inadequacy of a name to signify a city, which runs through the five reports belonging to the thematic group "Cities and Names" (abbreviated throughout as CN).

Plato's *Cratylus*: On the Correctness of Names

As made clear in its subtitle, Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* is *On the Correctness of Names (Peri onomaton othotetos)*. The three interlocutors are Socrates, Cratylus, and Hermogenes. The dialogue presents two divergent positions. One is Hermogenes' 'conventionalism': Names are arbitrary, and only social convention determines which are the names of things (Sedley 2020). In Hermogenes' own words, he

[C]annot come to the conclusion that there is any correctness of names other than convention and agreement. For it

seems to me that whatever name you give to a thing is its right name, and if you give up that name and change it for another, the later name is no less correct than the earlier (*Cratylus* 384d).

The other position is *Cratylus*' extreme 'naturalism,' according to which things have correct names by nature (Richardson 1976, p. 135). Paraphrased by Hermogenes, *Cratylus* maintains that

[E]verything has a right name of its own, which comes by nature, and that a name is not whatever people call a thing by agreement, just a piece of their own voice applied to the thing, but that there is a kind of inherent correctness in names (*Cratylus* 383a).

Cratylus believes that, as imitations of things, 'natural' and hence 'correct' names are their perfect portrayals (*Cratylus* 430a–430b). He is convinced that the natural name is the only correct one – to the effect that applying a name other than the natural name while speaking of a thing or a person amounts to failing to refer to it altogether.

Socrates takes an intermediate position between naturalism and conventionalism:

I myself prefer the theory that names are, so far as is possible, like the things named; but really this attractive force of likeness is, as Hermogenes says, a poor thing, and we are compelled to employ in addition this commonplace expedient, convention, to establish the correctness of names (*Cratylus* 435c).

Notably, *Cratylus* was not only a proponent of an extreme naturalism but also a zealous proponent of Heraclitus's flux thesis that maintained that, in principle, "there is nothing permanent but change." As formulated in Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus*, this thesis maintains that

[N]othing is one thing, or something, or of some kind. But from motion, change and mixture with each other come all the things which we say 'are' – an incorrect way to speak of them, since they never *are* anything but constantly become (152d–e).

According to Aristotle, *Cratylus* outdid Heraclitus in pursuing flux (*Metaphysics* 101a7–15). Paradoxically, combining his naturalistic position on proper names and his adherence to flux suggests that, if true to his conviction, in the end, *Cratylus* should have considered all names to be incorrect: an object can't be mentioned by the same name twice – for it is not the same object.

Contemporary conventionalist views on names are in line with Saussure's influential theory that language is a socially established system of rather arbitrary signs. In a nutshell, this view maintains that "a name is just a nondescriptive label you can stick on anything to which you have a prior means of referring" (McGinn 1981, p. 172). It seems that for a conventionalist position on proper names, the question of whether a name is adequate and hence correct is superfluous, perhaps even irrelevant. A correct name implies not "a deep adequation of the word to the thing but merely an artificial correspondence accepted and recognized by everyone" (Genette 1995, p. 8). In this scheme, incorrect names can only occur because of a failure to refer to a city by its assigned name, such as calling London 'Paris' or mixing Rafah for Haifa.

However, as the practice of commemorative place-naming demonstrates, the concern about the correctness of names is not limited to a *Cratylan* conviction that correct names should be perfect imitations of their objects. In the case of commemorative

place names, the correctness of names is potentially also a function of their belonging to an established ideological system and moral order that are embedded into and support structures of power and authority (Azaryahu 1996). Commemorative place names are susceptible to be considered ideologically and politically incorrect in the wake of a radical reorientation of political power structures and/or a paradigmatic change in the officially promoted ethos of society (Azaryahu 2012). Accordingly, the commemorative renaming of cities and streets has figured prominently in revolutions, and is a hallmark of periods of change of political regimes and phases of the moral redirection of society (eds. Rose-Redwood, Alderman & Azaryahu 2018).

Cities and Names

The analysis of the correctness of names in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* involves a speculative etymological inquiry into names belonging to Greek mythology and vocabulary to expose their original mimetic capacity. In contradistinction, in *Invisible Cities*, Calvino does not refer at all to the origin and lexical meaning of the names he chose for his invisible cities: no mention is made of how they came about, and no explicit attempt is made to connect the lexical meaning of the name with the city it designates. For Calvino, the names assigned to cities are inadequate and hence incorrect – not because they are arbitrary signifiers but because they are intrinsically equivocal and hence deceptive: they exude a false sense of permanence and coherence, yet the cities they ostensibly designate elude permanence and coherence.

1. Aglaura

Two cities cohabit under the name Aglaura. One is "Aglaura that is reported" – the city as it is said to be, which is defined in terms of its "proverbial virtues" and "proverbial faults." The other is "Aglaura that is visible," which exists in a physical place and entails lived experiences.

In CN1, the inadequacy of names is the result of the susceptibility of words to create and sustain false opinions: "nothing said of Aglaura is true, and yet these accounts create a solid and compact image of a city" (Calvino 1974, p. 67). From the Latin *imago*, the word 'image' derives from 'imitari,' meaning to imitate. The word image means how something is portrayed, how it looks, or how it seems. Yet in its modern use, the word image conjures, as Daniel Boorstin succinctly put it, "a distinction between what we see and what is really there" (1961, p. 191): in this sense, the image is about appearances; hence, it tends to be misleading, if not altogether fraught with intentional falsehood.

Its inhabitants believe that Aglaura is what they say it is. They faithfully adhere to their opinions, and ignore others who, though anchored in experience, lack the authority of received wisdom. The city reported overpowers the city experienced: "The city that they speak of has much of what is needed to exist, whereas the city that exists on its site, exists less" (Calvino 1974, p. 67). What is needed are clichés that sustain the fabric of unchallenged consensus. When clichés reign supreme, the conversation is limited to perpetual repetitions of platitudes: "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 1974, p. 68).

For its inhabitants, the name of their city conjures up the city that corresponds to and is consistent with their immutable received opinions about their city: "Therefore, the inhabitants still believe they live in an Aglaura which grows only with the name Aglaura and they do not notice the Aglaura that grows on the ground." Conflating the city with its images is not limited to a fictional Aglaura. Almost since its foundation in 1909, Tel Aviv has prevailed in the popular imagination as a cluster of well-known images purporting to describe what the city is about in terms of

its telos as a Hebrew city and a vibrant and cosmopolitan city (Azaryahu 2006). These images constantly permeate the public conversation and greatly influence how pundits, politicians, and planners engage with the city. Tel Aviv, which is mentioned by name, is a confluence of reality, wishful thinking, and mere fantasy.

When it refers to a city, a name indicates a location, but a name also doubles as its reputation. Accordingly, the name of a city also stands for generally held beliefs and opinions about the city bearing that name. The inhabitants of Aglaura are attached to their long-established ideas of and opinions about their city, which the name encapsulates, unaware of the widening discrepancy between the city and its reputation. In this sense, Aglaura – as spoken by its inhabitants – is the correct name for the wrong city.

2. Leandra

Leandra is the name of two competing visions of the city: “The true essence of Leandra is the subject of endless debate.” The debate is waged between two rival factions: the Lares and the Penates, the genius loci (spirits of place) worshipped by ancient Romans. These were the household gods that served as guardians. The Lares were originally the spirits of the dead, and were later assigned the task of protecting not only homes but also crossroads and cities. The Penates were the guardians of prosperity and the welfare of the household. The metaphoric reference to the Roman genius loci corresponds with the modern-day sense of genius loci as the spirit of place that embodies its nature.

An implied argument of CN2 is that, since the city displays a schizophrenic personality, the name Leandra can't express the true essence of the city. Yet, at another level, the underlying theme of the fable reported in CN2 is the question of to whom the city and its name belong. On the one hand are the Lares, the natives; on the other are the Penates, the newcomers. The Lares believe that the city is theirs, and it is the city that gives form to everything it contains, meaning that the newcomers should adapt to the city. The Penates believe that they are the true soul of the city, even though they arrived only recently. The Lares, for their part, consider the Penates “temporary guests, importunate, intrusive” (Calvino 1974, p. 79). Such is the built-in conflict in cities that attract many immigrants. Obviously, massive immigration is bound to change the character of a city and prompt resentment among veteran residents.

The Penates, according to CN2, “believe they take Leandra with them when they emigrate” (Calvino 1974, p. 79). But can a city be relocated with its inhabitants under the same name? Though not specifically concerned with names but with how the human mind conceives of objects in the world, the cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker wrote:

Consider what kind of object “a city” must be, given that we can say *London is so unhappy, ugly and polluted that it should be destroyed and rebuilt a hundred miles away* (1997, p. 328).

In *Trading Cities 5*, Marco Polo claims that, indeed, the relocation of a city and its inhabitants is a possibility. Ersilia is a city whose inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of their houses, and whenever the strings become too numerous that it is not possible to walk through the houses, the inhabitants abandon their city, leaving only the strings behind: “They rebuild Ersilia elsewhere” (Calvino 1974, p. 76). This creates an endless process of leaving and rebuilding the city; Ersilia is a series of abandoned cities of strings that are withering away, with one city that is inhabited, but on a temporary basis only: like the former Ersilia, the current one is bound to be abandoned and rebuilt elsewhere.

It seems that Marco Polo takes it for granted that new cities, successively built by the refugees, are called Leandra. The notion that the Penates take Leandra with them when they emigrate leaves the question open as to whether the new city where they settle would be called Leandra. What is probably meant is that they take the essence or the spirit of the city with them. In such cases, an adequate name for the new venture could be New Leandra.

3. Pyrrha

Pyrrha is the Greek goddess of healing, but in CN3, it is the name of a city that unfolds between its mental picture, conjured up by its name, and the realities of the visible city. CN3 is about the capacity of a name to summon a picture of a city in the mind's eye: “[Pyrrha] was one of the many cities where I had never arrived, that I conjured up, through its name: Euphrasia, Odile, Margara, Getullia” (Calvino 1974, p. 92).

Aimed at understanding how the mind works as a mental camera and how vision, perception, and memory are linked (Friedersdorf 2014; Zimmer 2021), the creation of pictorial representations of people and objects in the mind has recently been the subject matter of research. Studies focus on the ability of people to see mental images when they think of people and objects they have seen. The condition involving the inability of the mind to cast memories as visual images is called *aphantasia*.

The concern of CN3 is not about the mind's power to visualize memories but the capacity of a name of a city that has not been seen to conjure a mental picture of its topography and architecture. CN3 does not offer an explanation as to how a name might allow the mind to visualize what has not been seen. Interestingly, at least from how it has been reported in the press, the ongoing research on *aphantasia* is not concerned with the involvement of names in conjuring pictures of people in the mind's eye.

At another level, CN3 is concerned with the tension between the invisible (conceptual) and the visible (concrete) city, as evident in the discrepancy between image and reality, between what is seen in the mind's eye and what is seen with the eyes. The observation that the latter trumps the former seems to affirm the common sense idea that the city, seen with the eyes, is the real city: “As soon as I set foot there, everything I had imagined was forgotten; Pyrrha had become what is Pyrrha” (Calvino 1974, p. 92). The name that once conjured up what transpired to be false images now refers to the city that is visibly there, and to it alone:

The city high above the bay is also there still, with the square enclosing the well, but I can no longer call it by a name, nor remember how I could ever have given it a name that means something entirely different (Calvino 1974, p. 93).

The idea that the name Pyrrha designates the city as it exists in the world but not the city once imagined in the mind's eye espouses a Cratylan concern with the correctness of names. The name Pyrrha, now reserved for the visible city, is fated to be forsaken as a reference to the forgotten city once seen in the mind's eye. Pyrrha as seen in the mind's eye is dead; long live Pyrrha as seen with the eyes.

4. Clarice

Clarice is the name of “the glorious city that has a tormented history”: throughout its history it has decayed, then burgeoned again; yet, has always kept “the first Clarice as an unparalleled model of every splendor” (Calvino 1974, p. 106). The way it is portrayed suggests that Clarice is Rome in disguise: the glorious city is the eternal city that is also the city of the eternal return of splendor: Rome – imperial city, renaissance city, national capital – is a city that recurs not as a series of reincarnations,

but as a succession of reinventions that are aware of and draw on the “first Clarice” as a model and as an inspiration. Applying Edward Said’s formulation (1975, p. 315), the first Clarice enjoys “the authority of a privileged origin that commands, guarantees, and perpetuates meaning.”

Clarice is a city where change and durability are intertwined: “Populations and customs have changed several times; the name, the site, and the objects hardest to break remain” (Calvino 1974, p. 107). The reference to the name raises the question of whether something that constantly changes over time can be referred to by the same name. The name of a city may withstand time, but obviously the city keeps mutating over time. The persistence of name and site exudes a sense of deceitful permanence. Musing in *Cities and Memory* 5 Marco Polo observes:

Sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves (Calvino 1974, p. 30).

What distinguishes Clarice is the omnipresence of the “first Clarice” in the minds of its inhabitants: “That a first Clarice existed is a widespread belief, but there are no proofs to support it” (Calvino 1974, p. 108). In his poem *The Mythical Founding of Buenos Aires*, Jorge Luis Borges (1972, p. 63) wrote: “Hard to believe Buenos Aires had any beginning. I feel it as eternal as air and water.” A beginning is a discontinuity in the linear flow of time, but it is also a source of a new continuity. Notwithstanding the alleged uncertainty about the historicity of the alleged “first Clarice,” what matters is an awareness of a beginning that, even if it is ill-informed, still allows for a sense of historical continuance.

Being a historical entity, Clarice is a city in a state of flux. In accordance with his extreme views on flux, Cratylus did not believe that words can refer at all to objects of any kind. However, CN4 offers the possibility of a city that retains not only its original name and site but persists over time and through change. The perseverance of the original name conjures up the first Clarice and hence sustains a sense of historical continuity that emanates from the alleged existence of the “unparalleled model of every splendor” (Calvino 1974, p. 106) that looms large in the imagination of its inhabitants. The name Clarice does not refer to successive discrete cities located at the same site and bearing the same name. Rather, it refers to the same city, even though this city is not the same as its previous incarnations.

5. Irene

CN5 is also about name and change – not in time, which is the topic of CN4, but in perspective and circumstance. Irene is “the city that those of the plateau call Irene” (Calvino 1974, p. 125): Irene is the name of a city as seen from a certain vantage point. The name Irene does not apply when the city is seen from a different vantage point, since it is not the same city. This assertion challenges the common sense idea that the name of a city is not determined by a privileged vantage point and by how different observers see it. The counterintuitive point is made in unequivocal terms: “If you saw it, standing in its midst, it would be a different city; Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and if you approach, it changes” (Calvino 1974, p. 125). According to this thinking, the city is different things for different people in different circumstances:

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 (Calvino 1974, p. 125).

In a sense, CN5 considers the city as being in a state of ‘quantum coherence’: the city, like a quantum particle, is in a state of superposition and occupies different states at the same time. When the city behaves like a quantum phenomenon, it depends on the interaction with it. In quantum mechanics, the act of observation determines the object being observed. In the case of a city, the situation where different observers observe different cities rather than different aspects of the same city leads to the far-reaching conclusion that “each deserves a different name” (Calvino 1974, p. 125). Obviously, the idea to name each observed city differently is not applicable: the number of putative cities is practically infinite.

In his poem *Jerusalem, 1967*, the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai (1996, p. 50) articulates the idea of a city that has many names:

The city plays hide-and-seek among her names:
Yerushalayim, Al-Quds, Salem, Jeru, Yeru, all the while
whispering her first, Jebusite name: Y’vus,
Y’vus, Y’vus, in the dark. She weeps
with longing: Ælia Capitolina, Ælia, Ælia.
She comes to any man who calls her
at night, alone. But we know
who comes to whom.

A poem about a contested city, these names are those used to designate the city in different periods of its history and by believers of different religions. The idea that there is a city that has different names corresponds with common sense, but the multiplicity of names and the context of their use to designate competing versions of the contested city suggests the possibility that these names designate different cities that happen to inhabit the same space.

At a philosophical level, the notion that one can’t consider the city as one and the same thing corresponds with the theory of universal flux formulated in Plato’s dialogue *Theaetetus*: “[N]othing is one thing, or something, or of some kind” (152d–e). As a word that is one and the same, a name that designates the city can’t be correct since the city is never the same. Marco Polo, who admitted to never visiting Irene, concludes: “Perhaps I have already spoken of Irene under other names; perhaps I have spoken only of Irene” (Calvino 1974, p. 125). However, inadequate as they are, names are indispensable for speaking of objects. The only viable alternative is to avoid them altogether, which means silence. According to Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 101a7–15), true to his belief in universal flux, Cratylus “finally did not think it right to say anything but only moved his finger.”

Concluding Remarks

A main concern of Calvino’s reports entitled “Cities and Names” is the deceptive conflation between a city and its name. The issue with names of cities is their semiotic inadequacy when referring, in the words of Dani Cavallaro (2010, pp. 71, 74), to cities that are characterized by the “unsettling coexistence of discordant urban identities” and “a pervasive sense of instability and change.” In this sense, names of cities are inherently incorrect since they fail to satisfy the Cratylusian desire for a perfect accord between word and thing, name and city. According to Calvino’s non-essentialist perspective, a city is a multiplicity of cities that share the same name and often, though not always, the same location. The name of a city does not refer to an objective reality but conjures up an assortment of imaginable cities. Names are misleading since they exude a false sense of permanence and coherence, whereas flux and inconsistency predominate.

A primary function of names is to differentiate. Obviously, names that are inscribed on signs and on maps, and thus rendered official, distinguish between places. In his report on a city named Trude, Marco Polo says:

If on arriving at Trude I had not read the city's name written in big letters, I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off (Calvino 1974, p. 128).

Marco Polo observes that all cities are identical to Trude: "absolutely the same, detail by detail" and "only the name of the airport changes." What is meant is that, in principle, cities differ only in their name and location. This idea is further developed by Marco Polo in his response to the emperor's suggestion that cities are better recognized in an atlas than while being visited:

Traveling, you realize that differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents. Your atlas preserves the differences intact: that assortment of qualities which are like the letters in a name (Calvino 1974, p. 137).

This exchange adds another layer of falsehood to the names of the cities. Each name on the atlas conjures up a different city. Ostensibly, the different letters inscribed in the atlas render the individuality of cities visible and tangible. Yet the inscribed names also deceive. As Marco Polo explains, while traveling, the differences between cities are lost. Cities become indiscernible. They parrot one another, they resemble each other. Importantly, the final effect is that they are all the alter egos of Venice, Marco Polo's hometown: "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice" (Calvino 1974, p. 87).

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