



## **Introduction**

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Deriving its title from the novel of the same name by Italo Calvino, the Invisible Cities seminar investigated relationships among the cities, neighborhoods, and communities that artists have reimagined by their creations. We aimed to find teachable strategies for discovering the amazing in the commonplace wherever students live and learn. To accomplish this, we developed a method of perceiving and interpreting the urban environment. Our method foregrounds the value of what cannot be seen until it has been imagined. Called an "ambient poetics," this method depends on the curricular arts—fine, performing, and literary—for its inspiration, and on careful observation for its realization. We defined "cities" as constructed physical and social spaces (not all of them densely urban) organized by human activity and imagination into special places. Guided by Calvino, we numbered among them cities that once were there but now are gone, cities that will be there in the future but that exist only as plans, cities that live only in dreams and never will be, and cities that are hiding in plain sight all around us. Such cities will likely remain unseen until art and artists—better still, the art and artists that students will find in themselves—make them visible.

Krista Waldron, a YNI Fellow who teaches at Phoenix Rising, a school for adjudicated youths in North Tulsa, Oklahoma, summed up our approach in the Rationale section of her unit, "The Study of a Zip Code: Tulsa's Invisible City." For its accuracy as well as its eloquence, the passage merits citation in full by way of introduction:

The anchor text for our Invisible Cities seminar has been Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. In it, during long conversations between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, Polo tells story upon story about cities he has encountered in his travels. Or perhaps they are in his head. Or maybe they are simply dozens of manifestations of Venice. This distinction is irrelevant. It is the cumulative effect of all those ambient impressions that caused me to think about our rich and varied relationships with our cities. I found these ideas to be connected to my unit and to some unspoken thoughts I had been harboring about it. Some of these cities are defined by their residents, some by what is there or not there. Others are identified by the perceptions of visitors or the imagination of Marco Polo. Nothing is clear or certain in the narrative except that cities are complex places, and that we have deep, emotional connections to them through experience, memories, symbols, and history. Our relationships with our cities define who we are by how they capture our imagination and how they reflect what we love, hate and fear.

Leading her students first to conceive Mind Maps of North Tulsa, she will conclude with Heart Maps—the graphic representations by her students of the beauty they find in their neighborhood that they might have neglected and others might not be able to see at all.

To see these places Krista's students don't need to know exactly what they're looking for, but they do have to know how to look. That means keeping in mind that the first thing to look for is what they can't see at first sight. The practice of an ambient poetics is based on observation and participation, even (or especially) if the activity is as simple as taking a walk in the city. Always on the alert to catch a lucky glimpse of the unseen, practitioners recognize two overlapping phases of experience—perception and interpretation—organized into eight modes of inquiry. The perceptual modes are *optics* (what do they see? and what don't they see?) *sonics* (what do they hear? and what don't they hear?), and *mnemonics* (what do they know and what don't they know?). In this perceptual phase, it is also useful to take any opportunity to engage the other senses as well: tactile, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory. The interpretive modes correspond to different kinds of human performance or given-to-be-seen behaviors: *kinesics* (movements); *proxemics* (groupings); *histrionics* (interactions), *architectonics* (the built environment, divided into paths, nodes, landmarks, borders, and compelling destinations), and *forensics* (the social consequences of the above, and their likely causes). The effective practice of an ambient poetics does not require practitioners to use all of this terminology, or even any of it; what it does require is a willingness to imagine what they know, feel what they perceive, and interrogate what they learn.

The seminar got started by reading an essay by Margaret Olin on the *eruv*, which is a special boundary around a neighborhood that allows the observant Jews who live within it to engage in activities that they would not otherwise be able to do on the Sabbath. These include carrying physical objects like house keys and pushing baby carriages from place to place through the streets. The symbolic perimeter of an *eruv*, which is typically marked by a continuous strand of monofilament line, turns all the houses in the neighborhood it encloses into a single home, within which such efforts are permitted even on the day of mandated rest. In a passage typical of *Invisible Cities* but especially applicable to the interpretation of the *eruv*, Calvino vivifies the imaginative process of seeing the invisible. Marco Polo recounts the distinctive character of "Ersilia," one of the fifty five magical cities on his itinerary:

In Ersilia, to establish the relationships that sustain the city's life, 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. (p. 76)

*Blood, trade, authority, and agency* sum up as well as any four words can the many kinds of behavior-tracing "strings" that we found woven into the fabrics the cities we perceived and interpreted by our method. But the strands of meaning we sought were actual as well as imaginary.

The entire Yale campus is encircled by an *eruv*, and at our first meeting together in May, the seminar Fellows and their Leader took a walking tour to see if we could find it. The boundary marker itself, a fishing line strung from telephone pole to telephone pole, is all but invisible to observers until they actively search it out by finding the perfect angle in the right light. Andrea Krulas, English teacher at Roberto Clemente Community Academy in Chicago and alumna of the Film Studies program at Northwestern University, spotted it first. The author of "Paseo Boricua: Discovering Our Own Division," her unit on the Puerto Rican neighborhood surrounding her school, Andrea, with an eye for art, was able to guide our eyes so that eventually the rest of us saw it too. And once we saw it, we could not un-see it; nor could we see Yale or the city of New Haven again in quite the same way. Under the aegis of an ambient poetics, having made the invisible visible, we turned the oft-unremarked space through which we walked every day into a remarkable place.

Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins needed no prompting to agree that New Haven is remarkable, even where it is hardest for some to see. Pointing out that many of her students at the Davis Street Arts and Academics Interdistrict Magnet School have very limited knowledge of the historic New Haven Green—some have never been there even though they live within shouting distance of it—she designed "Whence We Stand: A Visual Geography/History Adventure" for her 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. Invisible until it is pointed out, the architectural detailing of the metalwork around the Green reflects its origins in West African forms. Waltrina's title plays on the familiarity of the phrase "Where We Stand," substituting the word *whence*, which suggests arrival from another time, to convey dynamic movement forward. With the cooperation of the New Haven Museum, her students will study the site of every building around the Green, which was first laid out in 1638, with an eye to what occupied the address before, what occupies it now, and what might occupy it in the future. Sometimes in order to see our way forward, however, the first thing to do is to look down. In "Travel Stories: Mapping the Vision, Walking the Journey," Gloria Brinkman is drawing the attention of her North Mecklenburg High School art students to their feet. Respecting the importance that they attach to their shoes, known to them as "kicks," she calls on them to use multi-media art projects to tell their stories of travel, whether along the transnational paths of migration that brought so many of them to Charlotte, North Carolina, or the pedestrian paths of habit and desire that lead them to walk in patterned directions every day, telling a story with their footsteps.

From day to day in the intensive session, our seminar discussions centered on four case studies, each honoring the unique circumstances of a specific situation in a school district that participates in the Yale National Initiative: 1) "Forking Time": downtown redevelopment in Richmond, Virginia and the expansion of the VCU School of the Arts; 2) "Division Street, Chicago": Boundary Performance in the City on the Make; 3) "Polk Street Stories": GLBT oral history and "The Poetic City that Was," San Francisco, California; and 4) tradition and innovation in the arts of the Diné Nation, from sand painting ("places where the gods come and go") to the Black Sheep Art Collective. The method of an ambient poetics, however, is applicable to any city. To illustrate that point, we began by reading three units from "The Big Easy: Literary New Orleans and Intangible Heritage," a seminar from YNI 2011: Shanedra Nowell, "The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot and its Legacy: Experiencing Place as Text"; Marilyn Dempsey, "The Intangible Heritage of the Diné"; Barbara Prillaman, "The Responsibility is Ours: Preserving Intangible Heritage"; accessed at

<http://teachers.yale.edu/curriculum/units/2011/4/>

We continued with three literary accounts of invisible cities on our (imaginary) walking tours: Nelson Algren's *Chicago: City on the Make* (1951; Anniversary Edition, 2011); Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *San Francisco Poems* (2003); and Diné poet Luci Tapahonso's *Blue Horses Rush In* (1997), supplemented by theoretical writings by Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) and Erving Goffman's "Regions and Region Behavior," from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). We also accessed the web resources cited below and many others. Sidney Coffin, for example, builds his course materials entirely from web-based poetry, written and spoken, in "Invisible Migrations: The Journey from Spanish to English and Back Again Through Performance Poetry" for Edison/Fareira High School in Philadelphia.

Mindful of the importance of the forensic mode of our ambient poetics, we noted how the arts have tended to take the lead in the creative transformation of living spaces for diverse peoples—revitalizing moribund communities through the magnetic draw of cultural attractions, sustaining tradition through historic preservation, and promoting local identity through art centers and educational outreach; but also bringing about (un)intended consequences, such as socioeconomic displacement through "gentrification." Our goal in part was to imagine the utopian possibilities of balancing arts-driven development with community diversity,

sustainability, and vitality. In that spirit, Benjamin Barnett-Perry's unit, "People with Disabilities: An Invisible Community," takes up the cause of Universal Design, a strategy of maximum architectural accommodation for all, exemplified in practice by the Ed Roberts Campus at UC-Berkeley, which is nearby Oceana High School, where Ben tutors students with special needs. Applying the logic of the late disability activist Ed Roberts to students classified with various learning disabilities, he asks them: "What, for you, is a curb?" His unit records the fact that the first "cut curb," now familiar nationwide as an accommodation to the differently mobile, was installed along Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley— a humbly (in)visible local monument to the grand arc of a universe that bends toward justice.

In fact, the Fellows in the Invisible Cities seminar discovered that they had already done much of the preliminary research for their curriculum units by living where they do. For some time now they have been learning and teaching the physical and mental nodal points, marked and unmarked, in networks of local meaning that already abound in memory and imagination. Barbara Prillaman, of Delaware's Conrad Schools of Science, discovered the inspiration for "Appetizers, Main Courses, and Desserts: A Menu of Sociological Research Methods" in the signature dishes of her favorite local restaurant. Culinary arts are arts indeed, and food ways render otherwise opaque folk ways highly transparent. We are not only what we eat, she argues, but also how we eat. The continuing influence of "The Big Easy" seminar from YNI 2011 is gratifyingly evident in Barbara's "Menu."

In the writing of such curriculum units, however, God (or the Devil) is in the details. The somewhat awkward phrase "forking time," for instance, comes from architect Steven Holl's programmatic description for the VCU Institute for Contemporary Art in Richmond. "The idea of 'forking time,'" he writes, "suggests that in the world of contemporary art there may be many parallel times. The notion of ongoing time and its 'grand narrative' are questioned." In a place where the memory of the Civil War is performed by outsized equestrian statues of Confederate generals lining Monument Boulevard, grand narratives are ripe for questioning. Evoking his plan for the Institute building's divergent ("forked") wings, which quote ironically the street plan of the historic "Fan District" beyond it, Holl proffers his landmark design to a deeply traditional city that is in the process, led by the arts, of postmodern reinvention. Even before ground for the Institute for Contemporary Art has been broken, however, time has forked again. Two miles downtown from the Institute site, which at this writing is still a (frequently robbed) gas station, lie the partially excavated foundations of the Lumpkin Jail, once the place where enslaved people were held captive until they were auctioned off in Richmond's thriving slave market. In the parking lot adjacent to this site, partially overshadowed by Interstate 95, the weathered shell of the "Winfree Cottage" rests on a temporary scaffold of rusting steel beams. Saved from demolition at the last moment four years ago, the Winfree Cottage is thought to be the only surviving structure in Richmond that was once owned by a slave, who inherited it from her master (who was also her husband). This is precisely the kind of history—the disavowed sharp end of "forking time"—that the one-time Capital of the Confederacy doesn't quite know what to do with, except to park it haphazardly somewhere like a trailer. But the Winfree Cottage is also now the centerpiece of Valerie Schwartz's YNI curriculum unit, "Invisible Richmond: The History Behind the Urban Landscape," which develops the contrast between history, which is cognitively grasped, and memory, which is personally felt by her 4<sup>th</sup> graders in their language arts and required Virginia Studies curricula at Richmond's Mary Munford Elementary School.

The fact is that even structures that have not escaped demolition persist in memory. They stick in the mind's eye with poignancy undiminished (or even intensified) by their disappearance. As in Calvino's *Ersilia*, the "strings" of living memory defy the abandonment and even the dismantling of the buildings they once entwined. Sarah Weidmann teaches language arts and social studies at National Teachers Academy in Chicago. She knows at first hand that in public housing, as in public education, Chicago is a city on the un-

make (*pace* Algren). Sarah's school looks out on the fields of rubble that until 2010 were the Ickes Family Homes, in whose name the original neighborhood of tenements was likewise bulldozed in the 1950s. By taking oral testimony from the survivors, she has reconstructed their stories for re-enactment by her middle-school students in "Vacant Lot: The Chicago Ickes Community Remembered." She has found answers to the forensic question that frames her unit: "Where does a place go that is no longer there?"

Yet of other invisible cities, neither living memory nor even the ruin remains. Sara Stillman's "Discovering the Invisible Bay Street: Uncovering Emeryville's History and Understanding Our Own" mentally and emotionally excavates the many-layered site of the Bay Street Mall. "*The Mall*" (for her students, there is no other) rises over the apocalyptically polluted remains of an industrial-era paint factory, which rests on the site of a Gold Rush dance hall, which once crowned the debris of an Ohlone Indian shell mound and burial site dating back millennia. No living informants speak of this buried city, but its address is at the intersection of Ohlone and Shell Mound, a crossing of Calvino-esque "strings" that Sara's students at the Emery Secondary School will be able to see when, using her method of Art Based Research on the street signs they pass by every day, they catch them in the best light at the right angle.

The Diné (Navajo) artists of the Black Sheep Art Collective have carved for Italo Calvino a special niche of critical admiration. Balancing tradition and innovation in the face of assimilationist pressures, as Native Americans have done for centuries, these painters and sculptors, like the novelist, know how to render invisibility in several dimensions. They follow the patterns made by the strings that wind their way through the byways of Navajo life. At first glance, the Diné Nation is not a city. But reading thousands of years of inscriptions etched on the rocks of the sacred canyons by the Holy People, the beholder learns otherwise. Some 300,000 petroglyphs by Puebloan artists have been identified across the canyon region, a mere fraction of the likely total. Diné Nation is therefore in fact a very old city, the oldest one in North America, already ancient when New Haven was founded in 1638. Precisely capturing the emotional tangibility of the traces marked only by slender lines, Calvino writes: "Thus, when traveling in the territory of Ersilia, you come upon the ruins of abandoned cities, without the walls which do not last, without the bones of the dead which the wind rolls away: spiderwebs of intricate relationships seeking a form" (p. 76). Marilyn Dempsey, of Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'olta, Window Rock Unified School District, Arizona, inspired our seminar with her accounts of the intricate relationships of Navajo life and culture—blood, trade, authority, agency, and so much more. In the example her curriculum unit for the traditional Navajo language school in Window Rock, only a small fraction of which can ever be written down, all of our other invisible cities seek their aspirational form.

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