

## **External examiner's report on the thesis by Mgr. Marie Heřmanová: Imagining the West: Marginality and Possible Lives at the Outskirts of a Mexican City**

By Jan Grill

This is an original and interesting piece of work based on a field research in *colonias* of San Cristóbal (Zona Norte), Mexico. The study is based on a fieldwork carried out during the years 2018-2013 and divided in several different, intermittent field visits (amounting to almost two years of being in the field). The research focused on exploring the relationship of young Tzotziles and Tzeltales to “Western” culture and society, to the tourists in the city centre, and occasionally, to the researcher as a representative embodying that ‘other’ dominant culture (while also being someone who did not quite ‘fit’ the stereotypical fantasies about Western tourist).

The thesis comprises Introduction, three main chapters and a brief conclusion (totalling 153 pages). The thesis is well written and, in general, has a good structure. The thesis draws on a good range of English and Spanish references. It offers an interesting and empirically based contribution to the existing literature based on an original fieldwork. Theoretically, the thesis draws on several debates and fields in social sciences: social marginality and territorial stigmatisation, studies of social imagination, construction of Otherness, migration and (im)mobility, as well as recently growing discussions on the uses and effects of social media. In particular, it draws on Yurchak's notion of ‘imaginary West’ and Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen's technologies of imagination’ and its ‘effects’. These concepts and conceptual developments are pertinent and provide useful analytical lenses to interpret empirically based ethnographic data. I see no difficulty in passing the thesis with some possible corrections and recommend the work to an oral *viva voce* examination.

The thesis somehow lacks a methodological section in which the author would document in greater detail her methodology and positionality in the field. The author describes her methodology in more general terms and her positionality appears at various parts (explaining the imagination of West through ways in which her interlocutors imagine her, her life, home in Prague, family, etc.) but it would be useful to provide a bit more detailed description of methods (describing the networks of people she worked with, their/her position within these, which practices and everyday routines did she participated in, how did her position transformed over the course of the fieldwork, question of gender in the field, etc.). It would be useful to have a bit more detailed description of what did she do in terms of practices and modes of participation during fieldwork? Which places did she visit and with whom did she hang out? How was she learning languages? How important were these efforts? The text would benefit from including this discussion, especially in relation to the general research theme. For many of the indigenous youth, encountering and getting to know the anthropologist ‘from the West’ must have provoked various forms of imagining and re-negotiating of difference (possibly different due to the more long-term relationship with her – unlike with other tourists?). For instance, it

would have been useful to know how did the researcher negotiated her access; and how was she classified by various agents encountered during the course of her fieldwork (passing from more generic *gringa* to possibly other categories?). For instance, these could be also documented by including more direct quotes or translations of specific categories in Spanish or in their first, native language – for example, she describes one “situation—the white girl sitting there with the kids “like a local,” \_they said” (p.48). What were the categories and terms used to address her? In general, providing key words in original with English translations would provide additional layer and strengthen her ethnography (which is mostly written with direct English translations, without offering the reader more nuanced and complex insights into the local categories, switching between Spanish, Tzotzil and/or Tzeltal).

The first chapter offers a contextualising introduction outlining the general features and overview of the urban area of Zona Norte with a particular focus on its history and present state, its situatedness and marginality within the larger infrastructural order/asymmetries vis-à-vis the whole city. It also shows the urban transformation in the context of massive rural-urban migration and the racial domination permeating and structuring the everyday lives and modes of settlement for the indigenous migrants (with their lives continuing to be marked by local-cum-national racialised stigma but also exoticised Otherness in the context of growing global tourism industry).

The author documents how the growth of global tourism created a niche for visibilising and for desiring encounters with staged ‘indigenous culture’ (on the side of the tourists), while at the same time continued to reproduce the affects of ‘not being wanted’ or for: ‘they want us to remain invisible’ (as one of the key informants put it – for the local indigenous). Exploring these contradictory forces and the metaphor of ‘invisibility’ present a very interesting idea in the thesis. Although the text develops it, it seems to me that the author could have analytically and empirically explored and conceptually developed a bit more. Considering the overall interest of the thesis in the forms of hopefulness, aspirations and imaginations of the possible future, it would have been particularly enriching to read a bit more detailed ethnography of how this invisibility gets embodied or contested by the indigenous interlocutors in the context of tourists’ desires for indigenous visibility (as well as numerically growing presence of indigenous in the city), or how the state and city administration continues to legally (re)produce invisibility (perhaps at times via ‘illegality’ classification) through various practices and ideologies of governing the city and its marginalised and racialised citizens. The author mentions some of these processes but not always support her claims with more concrete/in-depth ethnographic examples.

On page 46, the author claims, “that the denizens of the non-city internalize the concept of non-city, which is invisible to the people in the city.” I am not particularly convinced that this is about the category of ‘non-city’ here and it might possibly need more ethnographic evidence illustrating the ‘denizens’ concept of non-city’ - rather than using Auge’s concept, I would suggest that Wacquant-cum-Bourdieu’s

analytical apparatus (that is also interestingly used by the author in reference to the territorial stigmatization and Othering of the residents of 'Norte') might be more appropriate in explaining how the residents internalise the stigma inscribed in the struggles of imposing particular vision and division of space. Although I do find Auge's work useful in general, it seems to me that other possible theoretical and conceptual frameworks and tools might have provided more pertinent lenses for analysis of the empirical data presented in this chapter. Perhaps the author could explain and clarify this particular choice during the oral *viva voce* examination.

In the final part of the chapter 1, the author moves its focus on the everyday strategies and movements between the periphery and centre (of the urban space) and the struggles to circumnavigate the legal regulations of their selling (prohibition of 'on the ground' selling, controlling, and regulating sales in the centre) in order to continue generating income (for instance, by continuing selling 'on the way/while walking' or creation of *cooperativas*). This chapter also maps the alternative social institutions and socio-political organisations operating within the urban landscapes of her research. Similarly to other urban contexts documented by anthropologists in Latin America, there are relationship of complicity between, and co-existence of formal and informal social and political structures shaping the everyday lives of her informants.

In general, the first chapter presents a variety of interesting perspectives and points. I would have perhaps liked to read a bit more ethnographic descriptions and vignettes illustrating through concrete practices the kinds of daily movements and negotiations of different hierarchies within the city (crossing from the more marginalised parts to the centre in which the staging and performing certain kind of 'indigeneity' or 'culture' for display-cum-consumption is regulated, patrolled and disciplined). This would allow highlight one of the key relationship and the question of the thesis – i.e. how does the effects of territorial stigmatization relate to the imagination of the West? And I would also ask – what is the role of the local, regional hierarchies of class, race, gender or 'rural/urban' distinction in shaping these modes of imagination? This latter question raises an important point, which the author does not explore much. Considering the Latin American context and the way in which social and racial distinctions intersect and divide social life, it would be useful to situate the imagination of elsewhere not only in relation to the imagined West but possibly also within the imagination of *elsewhere* (of other imagined classes and racialised groupings) in the local/national context and hierarchies. To what extent and in what ways (if at all) does the 'imagined West' relate to the ways that other possible lifestyles in Mexican class relations (for example, material culture and lifestyles of more wealthy, middle/upper-class and well-travelled Mexicans) are constructed and imagined? It might be enriching for the analysis to consider these kinds of relations with imagined other Others in Mexico – for instance, those of higher classes or with more economic resources and 'symbolic capital' – other Mexicans who could afford material and symbolic lifestyle of the 'West'? It would be interesting to hear a bit more about these other kinds of possible *elsewhere* and 'non-West' others (if and how do these relate to, co-exist with or configure the imagination of West explored by the author in the text).

Chapter 2, entitled 'Imaginary West' introduces the reader to the central idea of the thesis. The author sets out to explore the imaginations of the place through the blogs of foreign tourists and observations from her fieldwork. She suggests that the San Cristobal can be seen as 'glocal city', which managed to reproduce (I would perhaps suggest 're-invent' or 're-fashioned' their own tradition through visibilising to the global landscapes of certain kinds of tourists) their local 'traditions' to attract tourists (whose imaginations in turn were animated by their fantasies of 'magical' place). The image and self-preservation, the author suggests, is carefully patrolled and censored by some actors – thus allowing for certain kinds of 'staged' indigeneity and performance – while also drawing and strengthening the lines of exclusion and discrimination of its indigenous inhabitants (thus following the colonial domination and racialised grammar).

Additionally, the author describes how 'The magic consists of a mix of strangeness, exotic difference, indigeneity, even dangerousness, but it is all presented in a way that is still friendly, comfortable, and—most importantly—comprehensible" (p. 71). The author tries to connect and develops the idea in dialogue with some of the texts discussing hybridity – and especially Fischer's work – proposing and characterising these phenomena as "manipulable hybridity"—different enough to feel exotic, but comprehensible enough to feel comfortable for the exploring tourists. This is a very interesting point – to think of ways of how one can imagine and consume 'difference' (indigenous, or other one) while simultaneously consuming it within the comfort and within the framework that makes it understandable/comprehensible/legible. At the same time, the text would benefit from illustrating these reflections with more specific ethnographic data and materials – similarly to her argument on 'patrolling the staged indigeneity and displayed authenticity' (of the city centre) and 'staging of magic' - my question and possible suggestion for her future writings is who are the actors and what are the mechanisms of (re-)producing these? To situate her argument within the field of concrete social relations and give more empirically grounded evidence would strengthen and support (in more 'thick' ethnographic sense) the line of argument here. She mentions some encounters between the indigenous and those 'invigilating' the city centre spaces but does not go deeper in discussing these encounters (though I also understand it might be beyond the scope and focus of her PhD thesis)

After briefly describing her own way of arriving to Mexico and reflecting upon her own initial imaginations of Latin American 'magical realism' she turns her attention to one of the central parts of the PhD thesis and interestingly sets up the analytical juxtaposition by moving our attention to the ways in which the locals imagine the West. It might be useful here to deploy and reconstruct the local categorisation in greater depth, which is somehow surprisingly missing from the text (only appears a bit later and in rather short manner – on page 94). It seems to me that the reader should learn through ethnographic reconstructions of concrete interlocutors words and phrases of these modes of classifying the Others, as well as its uses in different contexts of daily life. For instance, which expressions do they use and in which

contexts? *Europa? Occidente?* Are they different kinds of foreigners and what kinds of distinctions do they make— *gringos? Blancos? Europeos? Gente como tu?* Are there differences between different kinds of ‘Others’ or horizons of imagined West that would be reflected in different terms and categories? Are there difference between categorising and switching of categories between Spanish and their indigenous language(s)? What about other terms that other ethnographic studies document as related to the imagined West – for example, desiring ‘modernity’ (cf. Jame Ferguson’s classic work on expectations of modernity in African cities of Copperbelt)?

The very nicely written ethnographic vignette about the anthropologist failed attempts to start a big car and the ways in which this act elicited particular kinds of surprises and responses among her interlocutors (assuming that she would know as she was imagined to have cars like this) shows the process of being lumped together under the imagined ‘West’ or ‘modernity’. It is also a very nice ethnography-writing strategy in which she uses her own experience and encounters to illustrate how some of her local respondents imagined the West through questions and commentaries around her lifestyle, material culture, family relations, etc.

Drawing on theoretical and comparative studies of ‘imagination’ in anthropology, the author develops – what she calls – “an *effective difference* between imagined worlds such as the imaginary West and the everyday lived reality in Zona Norte, as the first one opens options and possibilities and the second one sets concrete limits to those possibilities.” (p. 114). The author convincingly illustrates this effective difference and tension between the imagined horizons and worlds and the experiences of living in Zona Norte.

The third and last chapter explores the rise of Internet in the context of author’s project and is complementary with her conceptualisation of the technologies of imagination. The chapter documents how the ‘Imaginary West’ gets re-configured with the ever-increasing presence, flows and speed of information circulating within social media, networks (like Facebook) and internet in general.

More generally, I would like to ask the author about her conceptualisation of ‘youth’ as a category. Although she suggests that her thesis explores the youth, it is not particularly clear in what ways the category of youth play an important role. Why and in what ways does the ‘young(er)’ age or generation play role in the research and its findings? Is (if so, to what extent) the category of youth doing some work here analytically (for the author)? Or, is it important ethnographically and encountered in the everyday lives and conversations about imagined West? The focus on the youth is not explained very clearly in the thesis. It might be useful to clarify at the oral examination.

Additional questions, which might be useful for future research, writing or for clarifications at the oral examination and defence:

- What role does racialization (intersecting with class) play in the imagination and fantasies about the West? How (if at all) would these imaginations of West vary and be different for other kinds marginalised groupings in Mexico (let's say, non-indigenous poor)? If not based on first-hand ethnography, it might be useful to think about comparisons with other literature.

- It might be useful to ask not only how did they imagine the West but also how did this imagination translated and informed their particular survival strategies and performances in their daily encounters with the tourists (or other actors)? For instance, how did they present themselves in their encounters and efforts to sell and present their 'indigeneity' and 'otherness' vis-à-vis the Western tourists? The thesis offers relatively little ethnographic focus on these micro-interactions and practices (based on observing and describing) and draws more on the conversations and reflections of the key interlocutors and researcher's encounters with them. For instance, would some of them try to forge imagination of themselves as somehow 'cosmopolitans' (with 'friends from all over the world')? How would the imaginaries of the West relate to some recent literature on everyday cosmopolitanism (imaginaries)?

- The thesis is based on a good range of literature and makes sufficient use of various works and concepts. In this sense, my following comments are not meant to suggest that there is a need for covering more literature before the oral PhD examination. However, perhaps for future research and investigations, as well as for widening the possible bodies of literature I will suggest some works that would contribute greatly to the kinds of arguments and discussions she is developing in her thesis. For instance, it is a pity that the author did not come across the work of Ira Bashkow, *The Meaning of Whitemen: Race and Modernity in the Orokaiva Cultural World*, which examines how "whitemen" and the concept of development are understood by Orokaiva people in terms of their own cultural assumptions and evaluations of western power, wealth, and race privilege. The author explores the ambivalent meanings that "the whiteman" holds for Orokaiva. Additionally, the author does not really make much use of the growing literature about mobilities and immobilities, hopefulness and being stuck, existential mobilities, which could complement well her discussions. For instance, work of Michael Jackson (*The Wherewithal of Life; or Life within Limits: Wellbeing in a World of Want*), Hans Lucht's work, Julie Chu's *Cosmologies of credit*, Stef Jansen's work on yearnings and hope; Martin Demant Frederiksen, or James Ferguson's works, etc. – these authors and their works could contribute to further developments and future writings of the author.

#### Minor suggestions to change and to consider in revisions:

- In the footnote number 1, the author states: "I learned Tzotzil in the course of my fieldwork, but I was never fluent in it and never learned it well enough to participate in any meaningful conversations. However, because of the bilinguality of my informants, I never needed a translator." – I suggest re-phrasing this note to add more clarity. This footnote seems to be a bit contradictory in its current version. On

one hand, the author states that she could not have any meaningful conversations but at the same time suggests she could understand and follow. It would be helpful to state more clearly.

- Page 9 – quote from Ursula Le Guin – need to provide exact quote (page and year of publication)

- Page 59 – *compañeros* is the correct way – there seem to be a typo

- The text has some errors in the writing, which should be modified for the final version. For instance, the author should use the correct name Canclini and not Cancilini.

In general, the author should go through the text carefully and correct all these kinds of stylistic errors. There are also some minor inconsistencies in the bibliography (formats, minor information missing, etc.) – the final PhD thesis should use consistently the same format for all the works included in bibliography and references. Please make sure that this is corrected and amended.

#### **FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The PhD thesis amounts to a convincing piece of ethnography. The idea that the indigenous youth project their hopes and fantasies in the imagined West while contrasting it with their everyday lived experiences is ably demonstrated. At the same time, some aspects of the thesis could be developed and improved in several aspects. I have tried to outline some possible comments questions and to recommend some lines for further exploration and clarification. **But in general, I recommend the present work to an oral *viva voce* examination (*práci doporučuji k obhajobě*).** It seems to me that it fulfills all the requirements necessary for being passed to and invited to the PhD oral defense.