Imagining the West: (Im)mobility, Social Media and Indigenous Youth in Chiapas, México

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Abstract: *This article examines the collective and individual imageries of the "West" developed by young indigenous people living in the suburbs of the Mexican city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Massive rural-urban migration has occurred in Chiapas in the last four decades, creating the infamous "poverty belts" in the suburbs of San Cristóbal. The inhabitants of these suburban areas are mostly of indigenous (Tzotzil or Tzeltal) origin and they earn their living by selling craftwork to tourists visiting the colonial city centre. The everyday interactions with tourists together with online interactions via social networking sites create a landscape of an "Imaginary West" (Yurchak 1995) – an unseen, yet ever-present homeland of the tourists and, most importantly, a place where "better lives" happen. Using the concept of "technologies of imagination" (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen 2009), the article analyzes the "Imaginary West" as a set of imaginative practices that significantly shape the way in which young Tzotziles and Tzeltales construct their identity and negotiate their place in their immediate (offline) environment. The article is based on my long-term field research in San Cristóbal focusing on the relationship between mobility patterns, identity and imagination in a marginalized urban environment.*

Keywords: *imagination, social networks, urban marginality, mobility, digital anthropology, indigenous youth, México, Chiapas*

I. México Imaginario

In 2001, the Mexican State Tourism Agency (SECTUR) launched a programme called "Pueblos mágicos" – Magical Villages.[1] A Magical Village is "a locality with symbolical attributes, legends, history and transcendental substantiality, in a word a MAGIC which emanates from each of its socio-cultural manifestations and which today means a great opportunity for touristic development."[2] San Cristóbal

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2   "es una localidad que tiene atributos simbólicos, leyendas, historia, hechos trascendentes, cotidianidad, en fin MAGIA que emana en cada una de sus manifestaciones socio – cultura-

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de Las Casas was one of the first Magical Villages announced, joining this exclusive club in 2003 (to date, there are 47 Magical Villages all around Mexico, some of them – like San Cristóbal – are urban centres with a large population, but there are also small and remote villages on the list). Positioned in the heart of the Highlands of the Chiapas region, the old colonial city certainly has its own, very specific charm. Cobbled streets lined with brightly coloured houses, old colonial churches and colonial *palacios* at every corner, and the green mountains almost always hidden in white clouds that surround the city create the magic of a "mystical, indigenous and ethereal San Cristóbal – a visit here is sure to enchant and fascinate."[3]

In 1994, San Cristóbal became world-famous as the centre of the uprising of the Zapatista movement. Indigenous fighters led by the charismatic leader Subcomandante Marcos added a new and very special touch to the magical atmosphere of the city, attracting antiglobalization activists from all around the world,[4] and the city also became a basis for various NGOs and collectives working in one way or another with the Zapatista movement. The constant presence of tourists, international activists and NGO workers, as well as the permanent residence of intellectuals, anthropologists or just new age type seekers from Europe and the United States has recently transformed the city in a very significant way. San Cristóbal is used to Westerners and offers them all kinds of the services they might call for – vegetarian restaurants, bookstores selling English, French and Italian paperbacks, little shops offering local organic coffee and a picturesque and colourful market with indigenous handcrafts and all kinds of local souvenirs.

I came to San Cristóbal for the first time in 2007 with a bunch of friends, activists and anthropologists who wanted to participate in the Zapatista *encuentro*.[5] I was not particularly interested in the Zapatista movement back then, but I was a big fan of Gabriel García Marquéz and an enthusiastic reader of everything related to Latin American magical realism. In San Cristóbal, I suddenly found myself right inside one of my beloved books, in the middle of something like a Marquéz Macondo.

Before actually going to Mexico, my picture of Mexican indigenous culture was very precise and blurry at the same time, based on books, movies and my exoticising fantasies about adventurous science done somewhere in deep forests and high mountains among the descendants of ancient civilizations. In my Mexico,

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les, y que significan hoy día una gran oportunidad para el aprovechamiento turístico." http://www.sectur.gob.mx/pueblos-magicos. English translation by the author.

3   http://www.gonomad.com/1485-san-cristobal-de-las-casas-mexico-an-ethereal-highland-city.

4   For a detailed ethnography of young global activists and Zapatista supporters in San Cristóbal, see Kuřík 2010.

5   About the organization, meaning and symbolics of encuentros, see Kuřík 2009.

everything was colourful, exotic and, in a very special way, surreal and irrational – like a Frida Kahlo painting. I was not even much interested in the history or the contemporary politics of Mexico – almost everything I knew I had learned in fiction books and movies. My individual colourful imageries were, moreover, widely supported by collective ones – you can open basically any catalogue of any Czech travel agency offering tours to Mexico and you will find pictures of pyramids in the jungle ("ancient civilizations") and smiling women in bright-coloured clothes ("still existent descendants of ancient civilizations") mixed with photographs of sunny beaches and the sky-blue Caribbean sea.

Edward Fischer (2004) observes that this is how most of the magical realism novels work – they melt the exotic, strange and unknown into a narrative structure and social context we know and understand. He also suggest that this "melting" process stands at heart of the scientific concept of hybridity, which was widely used in postcolonial studies in the 1990s. "Westerners borrow an essentialized view of indigenous to help satisfy our insatiable appetite for authenticity in this age of reproductions and simulacra… take Latin American novels of magical realism that cook up the cold offerings of native culture to our hot western tastes."

The classic of Mexican social science, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, deploys his famous metaphor of "México imaginario" from very similar premises. He distinguishes *México imaginario*, which pretty much corresponds with the image presented by travel agencies and described above, from *México profundo* – the real and profound Mexico of rural indigenous communities and recently also of large swathes of a poor urban population who, according to him, continue to maintain a lifestyle deeply rooted in ancient traditions. While his description of the profound Mexico is in itself very exoticising and needs to be treated carefully and critically, the distinction nonetheless remains useful in this context. Batalla suggests that *México imaginario* is imaginary not because it does not exist (it certainly does as every tourist who has ever been to San Cristóbal could confirm and also because "imaginary" does not imply "not real" as will be discussed later), but because it is highly selective and ignores the everyday reality of a large part of the Mexican population.

In San Cristóbal, the difference between the imaginary and the "profound" Mexico (if we were to take Batalla's metaphor literally) can be experienced even physically. Once the visitor crosses a small dirty river at the end of the public market which marks the borderline between the city centre and its northern suburbs, he leaves the *pueblo mágico* and finds herself or himself in a different world. Over the river, the so-called Zona Norte begins – an extensive belt of settlement inhabited by migrants from indigenous[6] communities from the Highlands of the Chia-

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6   Since I use the term "indigenous" so often here, I feel the need to point out that I am very well aware of all the problems related to the use of such a label. Mácha (2005) suggests that in order to eliminate the strong ethnocentric connotations of this word and avoid all noti-

pas region, mostly of Tzotzil or Tzetal origin. The red, blue and yellow houses with thatched roofs are substituted, first, by far less splendid rows of family homes with small shops in front of them, selling meat, tortillas or coffee to passers-by, and the cobbled streets change into plain asphalt roads. After a few hundred meters, the asphalt disappears too and dirty roads are lined with homes in various states of habitability – concrete houses alternating with wooden or metal and cardboard shacks. Spanish (or *castellano* as Mexicans say) is nowhere to be heard here, and the quick, dense yet melodic sentences in Tzotzil or Tzeltal confuse the chance visitor with their alien-like sounds. Children in plastic flip-flops play in the pools of water in the dirt by the roads, and small shops sell only corn chips, cookies, soft drinks and instant Nescafé. The organic bakeries and fair-trade fresh coffee shops in the city centre seem like a distant memory from another world here.

In 1950, San Cristóbal had around 35 000 thousand inhabitants exclusively of mestizo origin (the so-called ladinos). Today's San Cristóbal claims to have 185 000[7] inhabitants (unofficial numbers go much higher – it is hard to count those who use neither water nor electricity) and the colonial houses are surrounded by large areas of new settlements – Zona Norte in the northwest of the city, but also middle class suburbs in Zona Sur along the *caretera Panamericana*, the main highway connecting San Cristóbal to the Chiapas capital city, Tuxtla Gutiérrez. In 2008, there were 43 districts, called *colonías*, in the Zona Norte. In 2010, the number increased to 47 (according to SAPAM, The Office for the Distribution of Drinkable Water) or 49 (according to the inhabitants of Zona Norte). In 2013, I counted at least 4 new colonías on the outskirts of Zona Norte that were not yet on the official city map.[8] The colonías are a very accurate example of what urban

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ons about indigenous people as a race, the term should be used strictly with a capital, as in "Indigenous", to designate a group of people who live in the same geographical territory (like Germans with a "G" do), and when this rule is no sufficient, we should specify the term by using the concrete name of the ethnic group in question (Tzeltal and Tzotzil, in my case). But by doing so, I would only shift the problem to a more concrete level (the misunderstanding remains the same whether we speak about "indigenous" or "tzotzil"). According to the Mexican state, some of my informants are not even indigenous, because they do not speak any indigenous language (the most important official criterion), but when they spoke about themselves, they repeatedly used the Spanish term "indígena" (here by me translated as "indigenous"). This fact I think gives me the right to call them indigenous too. And I also prefer the use of the lower case /indígena instead of Indígena/, because "Tzotziles" are in my opinion rather a group based on Anderson's imagined community (Anderson 1983) than just a "group of people living in the same territory."

7   www.inegi.org – Chiapas

8   The only institution able to provide a map of the whole city is the SAPAM office that runs the city water distribution system. When I asked for a map at various offices of the city hall, I was given only a map of the city centre – the Zona Norte seemed to be non-existent in these documents. If you google "map of San Cristóbal", none of the results will show you the who-

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anthropology calls "poverty belts" (cinturónes de miseria", Betancourt 1997: 3): chaotic and extremely diversified areas in various degrees of urbanization, also associated with all the stereotypes usually related to marginalized urban areas. As Loic Wacquant sums it up: "They are known, to outsiders and insiders alike, as the 'lawless zones', the 'problem estates', the 'no-go areas' or the 'wild districts' of the city, territories of deprivation and dereliction to be feared, fled from and shunned, because they are – or such is their reputation, but in these matters perception contributes powerfully to fabricating reality – hotbeds of violence, vice and social dissolution" (Wacquant 2008: 1).

While the oldest colonías – those closest to the public market which forms an imaginary borderline between the city and its northern suburbs are fully urbanized – new colonías have no basic infrastructure and are often composed of a few shacks clamped to the hillsides. Inhabitants of Zona Norte mostly came to the city from one of the indigenous communities in the Highlands in order to find a new way of subsistence. Many of them (mostly women and children, but also men sometimes) end up as "vendedoras" – selling souvenirs to the tourists in the city centre. Here, with their colourful clothing and incomprehensible languages, they become part of the "mystic" and "magical" atmosphere associated with the old colonial city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The Tzotziles and Tzeltales from Zona Norte literally cross the border between the "imaginary" and the "profound"[9] Mexico every day on their way to work.

Nowadays, the complete area of Zona Norte is roughly three times that of the city centre and is home to more than two thirds of the city inhabitants. There are minibuses running every ten minutes from the public market to various colonías, except for the ones that are positioned on the hillsides – to colonías like La Hormiga or San Antonio del Monte, a taxi would be the only option and when it rains heavily during the rainy season from March to September and mud rolls down the steep streets, these colonías can become inaccessible for several hours once or twice a week. But under normal conditions, a small *collectivo,* a regular taxi or a half hour walk could take anyone into the Zona Norte. Yet, besides its inhabitants, no one ever seems to go there. During my fieldwork, on my frequent rides from the city centre to my rented home in Zona Norte, I only met one woman in a *collectivo* who was clearly a foreigner. She was frantically taking pictures of everything she saw from the window of the minibus, yet she did not get out of it. I also

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le city, but – again – only the city centre. Omission from official city maps and urban plans is common feature of rural migrant informal settlements in Latin America, as Ann Varley notes (Varley 2012).

9   I do not mean to imply here that what Bonfil Batalla describes as the "profound" México is an accurate representation of the lives of my informants. I use his distinction between "imaginary" and "profound" as a mere metaphor in a literary sense of the word, and I will explain later why this metaphor does not work in an analytical sense.

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remember very clearly a conversation with a taxi driver whom I asked to take me to colonía Progresso. With a very serious face, he explained to me "that the people there are dangerous" and "that they never work and if you ever see a nice house there in the Norte, that's because they're selling drugs." This driver was probably the most eloquent on the topic, but I collected several similar conversations with taxi drivers (and once even with a *collectivo* driver).

I conducted my fieldwork in Zona Norte, spending 14 months there between 2008 and 2013. My primary research question deals with the relationship between urban marginality (since this label could certainly be applied to the colonías), mobility and imagination – I focused on how the frequent interactions with tourists in the city centre shape the way the people in the colonías see, construct and re-construct their own position in the infrastructure of the city and how imageries of the "West" (i.e. the place where the tourists come from) are incorporated into this process. The mobility of the tourist, their constant comings and goings, plays a significant role in both the construction of the identity of my informants as "marginal", as well as in their perception of what being a "western tourist" means. In the course of my fieldwork, however, my field-site changed significantly through the expansion of Internet use among my informants. Their encounters with the tourist and with the "West" they represent are no longer restricted to personal communication in the city centre and the internet-mediated representations of the "West" became one of the main sources of collective imageries among young Tzotziles and Tzeltales. The use of online communication tools (mostly social networking sites) also further stressed the importance of long-distance mobility – in contrast with virtual long-distance communication. In the following sections of this article, I would thus like first to introduce the landscape of the "Imaginary West" created and constantly imagined by the young indigenous people from the colonías and, secondly, to point out the influence that the expansion of social networking sites is having on the imagined worlds built by my informants and their (dis)connection to the offline reality of their lives.

As follows from the above, the conceptualization of the "West" as an imagined world was one of the original topics of my research that I have tried to explore throughout my fieldwork, while the influence of Internet, however, was not something I was originally interested in – mostly because wireless internet connection was not really available in San Cristóbal at the time when I started my fieldwork and smartphones – the only wireless devices available to my informants – were yet to become widely sold and used. But the simple fact that all my key informants are now almost constantly in touch with the inhabitants of their "Imaginary West" via Facebook, G-chat or Whatsapp turned out to be a crucial factor in my exploration of the effects imaginary worlds have on their physical counterparts, and I would like to present here some ideas of what implications this might have not only for

my own research, but for the study of imagined and/or virtual worlds in general.

II. "People Like You Have Cars Like This" – The Landscape of the Imaginary West

As I was became acquainted with everyday life in Zona Norte, I gradually went through a process of confronting all my personal imageries about the colourful and mystic indigenous México with the lived reality of the people I had previously imagined. I accompanied some of my Tzotzil friends to work, so I crossed the aforementioned border between "magical" and "profound" México on their way to work with them many times. I learned about their ways of crossing to the city centre and participating in the picture of "Pueblo Mágico" as a way of subsistence.[10] But as I did so, I realized that I was not the only one who was doing the imagining and that my imaginary México, with all its mystical colours and flavours, has its counterpart in a sort of imaginary Europe. I was also constantly "being imagined" together with all the tourists and global nomads that my informants encountered daily.

The following is a description of an event which was crucial in my fieldwork in many respects – besides being a very good example of the feeling of "being imagined", it was also the first critical moment I experienced together with the family of my main informant.[11]

María is a Tzotzil woman in her forties (I never got to know her real age and I doubt she knows it herself) and a mother of four children: Carlos (26), Miguel (24), Natalia (23) and Cristina (21). She was born in a remote and small village in

10 Although it is a topic that, if elaborated, would need a separate article, I feel the need to stress that my informants are not passive "objects" of imageries created by someone else, but that they also actively participate in their creation. Everyday, the women would put on their traditional trajes – thick sheep wool skirts and embroidered blouses – when they are going to work to the city centre. One example of many – younger girls would usually just wear a pair of jeans and sneakers when at home, but they would never go to work in regular clothes – "because we wouldn't sell anything. The tourists like the indigenous clothes," one of them explained to me.

11 I am well aware of the epistemological and methodological questions generated by the fact the I am myself a significant part of the imageries my informants created. I was constantly questioned about my lifestyle in Prague, about the clothes I wear, about my friends, my family… and many crucial situations in my fieldwork evolved around something that concerned me personally. Again, this would probably need a separate article if elaborated properly and I have had many difficulties in my research in trying to find a balance between being both methodogically and theoretically reflexive and being over-reflexive in the narcissistic sense. I find that a "novelist" (Byler and Iverson 2012) style of writing, where the author's own ego can be more visible in a sort of "diary" style, can help overcome these difficulties, if it is not over-used at the expense of the soundness of the presented material.

the mountains, approximately a two hour car-ride from San Cristóbal. She came to San Cristóbal when she was 18, leaving her violent and usually drunk husband behind. She works as a *partera*, a traditional midwife, and as a *vendedora,* like most of her friends and female family relatives in San Cristóbal, selling handicrafts to tourists in the city centre. The family lives in the colonía Progreso in a two-bedroom house and all the children attended Spanish Sunday school. María speaks Spanish quite fluently, but she prefers Tzotzil, while her children are completely bilingual (they always spoke fluent Spanish with me, though between themselves – even in my presence – they usually used Tzotzil). Natalia has a child of her own, a little boy named Jesús, but she still lives with her mother, because the boy's father, a US citizen Leo, turned out to be a heavy drinker and consequently completely useless and sometimes cruel and violent (by the time I met Natalia, he was causing her so much trouble she even considered leaving San Cristóbal to get rid of him).

Right at the beginning of my fieldwork, when I had known María and her children for approximately a month, I experienced one quite critical situation with them. I met María in front of the cathedral in the centre and she asked me for a favour – Leo had left for the United States leaving his car full of stuff in front of his house (situated in one of the typical *fraccionamentos* in Zona Norte). María was afraid that something could happen to the car and asked me to drive it to her street, so she could watch it from her house (no one in the family had a driver's license). Even though I was not a very experienced driver at the time and I was trying to avoid driving in Mexico (where the only respected traffic law is "first come first served"), I was also eager to please her and confirm my friendly relationship status with her family, so I agreed. But when we came to Leo's house I realized that there might be a difficulty – his car looked like some sort of expensive SUV, the type I only knew from Hollywood movies. It had an automatic gear unit and a very complicated safety system…so to cut a long story short, I was not even able to start the engine. It was not even my fault, as it turned out later, because the battery was flat, but at the time it looked like a clear failure on my side. It was around midnight, Natalia was upset and talking on the phone with Leo, who was, unsurprisingly, drunk and giving me a lot of pointless advice, and María was standing in front of the car lamenting that she does not know what to do, that we cannot just leave the car where it is because somebody will steal Leo's things for sure. I felt stupid because I had promised her that I would solve the situation and I had not been able to fulfil the promise, but most of all I felt quite hopeless because I just was not able to explain her how it is possible that I can not handle the car – I repeated many times that I had never driven a car like this before, but she just could not seem to understand me. We decided to go back to her house in Progreso, where Miguel and Carlos were waiting for us. When we entered the house, the boys were waiting in the kitchen and María immediately started talking in Tzotzil, explain-

ing to her sons what had happened. Miguel than turned to me and asked in Spanish, wonderingly: "How come you can't get it started? Our cousin also tried and he didn't know what to do either, but we thought that it's because it's an American car and that you would know for sure. We have different cars here, old cars…but you have cars like this, don't you? We thought that you have those cars at home, so you would know how to handle it, cause maybe you have the same car at home." A strange and big vehicle that I had never seen in my life before had been assigned to me on the principle that "people like you have cars like this." Out of desperation, I just murmured that I usually ride a bike.

But from then on, I started to think about reciprocity in the process of imagining, because it was at that moment that it occurred to me that this simple presumption – "people like you have cars like this" – must have deeper roots. Is there a world of "people like me" that are characterized by big and strong cars and – perhaps – also by other specific things? How is this world created, why is it created and what does it mean? The geographical dimension of this world obviously was not important, because the car was from the US, as Carlos mentioned, and they all knew that I am not from there. But yet, somehow, people like me have something in common with cars like this. On a similar premise, as I later noticed, my female informants would talk about the specific fashion style worn by tourists in the city centre. It does not matter if Levi's jeans and Converse sneakers are worn by a French tourist, US hippie or Czech anthropologist – the simple fact of wearing these specific brands puts all the people wearing them in the same group of "foreigners" or "Westerners", independently of their real country of origin. Wearing specific things like jeans, denim shorts or outdoor jackets, or driving a specific sort of a car were considered by my friends to be a symbol of belonging to an imagined world of the "West", with a location that is not geographically specific.

Alexei Yurchak used the metaphor of the "Imaginary West" in his study of the break-down of the Soviet regime (Yurchak 2005: 158nn). He characterizes it as "The Elsewhere of Late Socialism" and shows how this concept was creatively placed into the communist world-view (which it rationally contradicted) and how the young people who listened to illegal records of Western rock bands could still be convinced about the rightness and omnipotence of the Party's politics. He then continues by exploring the sources of the imaginary worlds which existed within the Soviet universe (the Imaginary West being although one of many, perhaps the most significant), and also stresses the role of fiction and literature in general in the creation of these imaginary worlds. He makes a very interesting parable by comparing the Imaginary West to "the Zone", the enigmatic land with mysterious powers presented in Andrei Tarkovski's famous film "Stalker". The Zone in the film, as does the Imaginary West has "a paradoxical status – intimate, within reach, and yet unattainable. The Zone could only exist as an imaginary construct

that could not be encountered in reality"… "a kind of space which was both internal and external to the /Soviet/ reality" (2005: 161). This paradoxical status is also the reason why this imaginary West is based solely on images, ideas – Yurchak says that the imaginary West "was produced locally and existed only at the time when the real West could not be encountered" (Yurchak 2005: 159).

Yurchak's notion of the Imaginary West also in part corresponds with Appadurai's concept of "imagined worlds" (Appadurai 1996). Appadurai defines his various "scapes" (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, etc.) as "building blocks of what (extending Benedict Anderson) I would like to call *imagined worlds*, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe" (Appadurai 1996: 33). Like Yurchak, Appadurai also uses examples from film and literature to back up his theories. While the concept of imagined worlds, as Appadurai presents it, is really a theoretical extension of Benedict Anderson imagined communities, he however specifically points out how two phenomena usually ascribed to "modernity" – i.e. migration and electronic media – work as starting points for building such imagined worlds.[12] "Such media transform the field of mass mediation because they offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds. (…) Always carrying the sense of distance between viewer and event, these media nevertheless compel the transformation of everyday discourse. At the same time, they are resources for experiments with self-making in all sorts of societies, for all sorts of persons. They allow scripts for possible lives to be imbricated with the glamour of film stars…" (Appadurai 1996: 3). Appadurai repeat-

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12 Appadurai's theory of "imagination as social force" is very powerful and there is no denying that "Modernity at Large" is today a canonical text when it comes to the social theory of the imagination, but in my opinion it lacks – at least in some respects – soundness. Appadurai distinguishes imagination from fantasy and claims that only now has imagination as such entered the lives of everyday people and become a "social force" because – unlike fantasy – it is shared collectively and propels people to action. While the observation that imagination in a society with mass media and mass migration works differently than it worked before is indisputably correct, I cannot agree with the assumption that this means that imagination was not present in everyday life before – or only in the form of religious or mystic practices, as Appadurai suggests (1996: 3nn). Imagination is a basic capacity of the human mind and while its social and collective manifestations change, the capacity itself is always immanent to human existence, both individual and collective. In this respect, I agree with other authors (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen 2012) who have criticized Appadurai over the notion that we cannot distinguish between a world that is "imagined" and a world that is "real" as different realities, and treat the immediate and everyday environment of social actors as more "real" than – let's say – a world generated through online news services. The imagination is one of the capacities that enables us to see and perceive and make sense of any possible world, as I will argue in the following sections of this article. What needs to be studied are the various manifestations of imagined worlds in various social and political conditions.

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edly points out that the power of imagination lies in the fact that it makes things and possibilities *imaginable* and that there's a difference between *imaginable* and *possible*. Imagination in an Appaduraian sense is so powerful because it lets us imagine things and situations we have never experienced before – it allows us to write scripts for possible lives we might have lived, to paraphrase him. And once we know we *could* have lived them, we might start to think about why we actually *cannot* – hence his link between imagination and resistance (which is also important in Yurchak's concept, though not as explicitly).

Jonathan Friedman (2000) points out that for any imagined world to be established, a shared meaning needs to be generated. This meaning according to Friedman is always generated through a shared social experience that lies at the core of any form of social and cultural reproduction. In Appadurai's case, the inhabitants of most of the "scapes" do not share any direct experience with the people they imagine and dream about – the inhabitants of a refugee camp in Somalia, to use one of Appadurai's own examples, who dream about a life in Europe have maybe never met someone who is actually from Europe, yet they have a collective notion of what life in Europe looks like. The fact that people from Europe and people from a refugee camp in Somalia never shared a social experience does not, however, mean that the imaginary world of Europe (imagined by refugees in Somalia who have never been to Europe) does not exist. Rather it means that when analyzing it, "we must ascertain to what degree the same meanings are attributed to the same phenomena and/or objects in the global arena. Second, one must ascertain the ways in which there might be said to be overlapping resonances or analogous experiences being produced that allow a broader possibility for identification of the same things the same way" (Friedman 2000: 646). Or, as Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen say – we must "focus on the concrete processes by which imaginative effects are engendered, or, what we call, technologies of imagination" (2009: 11).

While in Yurchak's case, as well as in Appadurai's general theory, imagination is activated by images or sounds (books, music, stories in general), the "imaginary West" that I discovered in my research is embedded in a very concrete shared social experience – the direct encounters with tourists that constitute the way of living and thus everyday routine of my informants. It is through these direct encounters (and their subsequent replays via online communication channels that will be analyzed later), that the young indigenous people who have never left the city in their whole life, whose parents sometimes speak only tzotzil or tzeltal, and who live in neighbourhoods with no basic infrastructure, receive information about a different lifestyle of people with SUV cars and expensive jeans, and through this one, sometimes very short and sometimes only virtual, but still shared experience, they also somehow become part of it. The different and distant lifestyle of "people like me", the residents of the Imaginary West, has many components like education (university degree) or family situation (for example, being single or in a rath-

er free relationship, instead of being married with two kids at the age of 18), financial situation and consequently relationship to material things – like, possible ownership of a big SUV car or Levi jeans.[13]

Later in my fieldwork, when I came back to San Cristóbal after a longer period spent in the Czech Republic, I experienced another conversation about what the "Imaginary West" looks like. I was sitting on the stairs in front of the main cathedral of San Cristobal de Las Casas with Jeanette, a young tzeltal woman living in La Garrita, one of the oldest parts of Zona Norte. Jeanette was one of a very few members of her social group who completed a university degree, but was currently unemployed, desperately looking for any source of income and taking care of her sick mother. It was a sunny day with a clear blue sky and the mountain sun was warming. In these sunny days, San Cristobal felt to me like the most beautiful place on Earth – blue sky, green mountains surrounding the city, all the colours of the picturesque colonial buildings in the city centre and the colourful dresses of indigenous women. I closed my eyes and felt wonderful with the warm sun on my skin, after yet another cold night. Jeanette stared at me and started laughing: "You look almost blissful in the sun, like you're somewhere on the beach."

"Well, I am enjoying myself!" I replied, also laughing. "You know, where I live, there's cold and dark for almost 5 months each year, can you imagine?"

"Really? Well, that never occurred to me… I always imagine you have nice weather where you live."

"Well, yeah, we do sometimes, but not quite as often as I would like. What else do you imagine?"

"You know… everything. What you do, how you live, what your university looks like, how the people you meet look? That's what I try to imagine."

A few minutes later, we bought fresh juice from a restaurant across the street and sat on a bench on the main pedestrian zone that was full of both tourists and locals, indigenous sellers of food or souvenirs, *ladino* families on their afternoon walk and loud groups of young Spanish and Italian backpackers. We were discussing the movie we had seen together a few days ago – Jeanette had asked me to take her to the only cinema in the city to see the new Harry Potter film. I asked her what she likes about this type of film and she replied, thoughtfully: "Well, I like it, because it's fun! It's not just about Harry Potter, that's a fairytale. But I do like Hollywood movies, because they show a whole world that I would never experience

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13 It is interesting that the symbolic importance of such things as jeans is almost never based on a specific brand – even though the jeans my informants would notice on passing girls would be mostly of the same brand, they almost never mentioned the brand itself and they might not even know it. It was the specific type of clothing that was attributed to the inhabitants of the Imaginary West, but the obsession with brands that is actually intrinsic to Western culture is not manifested here.

here. I know reality is not like in the movies, I'm not that naive, even for you in Europe, it's not like this. But still, what is waiting in the future here, for me? When I think about your life in Europe, it's like a movie for me. You live in the city, you have friends, you go and have a coffee with your friends, you study at university... and I think you live in a nice place, is that right? I think your place must be really nice. I like to think about it. I always think about it when I talk to the tourists – how they live, how their home looks. It's kind of like a movie for me, you know?" and she started laughing again.

What Jeanette thus did, when she said that my life is like a movie for her, constituted a simple, yet at the time, for me, very surprising process – she placed the real people she encountered and whose story she knew in the imaginary world she knew from movies. It was the equivalent of the simple assumption that "people like you have cars like this." Throughout my fieldwork, I experienced many similar situations – my home and the lifestyle I led while being home was quite often discussed and I had to answer never-ending questions about my studies, my family or about – for example – the brand of jeans I was wearing – where did I buy them, could they be bought in Mexico as well, how much did they cost me? In just the same way I used to exotize and imagine indigenous people in Mexico, I was also being placed in some imaginary landscape of "Europe", where things like coffees with friends from university do happen and where people know how to handle big cars, because – obviously – they drive them.

Jeanette knew very well that the movie lifestyle she was talking about is not my everyday reality, but she also knew that it is still somehow real – as she put it, "it's not like that completely, but something like that, and it must be great and you cannot experience it here." Or, as Yurchak says, her "Imaginary West" was almost there, but never really there – within reach (because I was sitting right next to her) but also unattainable and still an ocean away.

I mentioned above that the Imaginary West as it is created by young people from the suburbs of San Cristóbal has many components, like university education or family situation, but the last mentioned – the relationship to material things and the perception of Western consumerist patterns in general – is the most visible of all. Countless hours are spent by the young girls in the suburbs talking about clothes or fashion, peeking through the windows of the few clothes shops and boutiques in the city centre, or exchanging clothes and creating new combinations. On many occasions, the fashion style of tourist girls (and sometimes boys) was mentioned, judged and in various ways reproduced. While it might be difficult for a young Tzeltal girl to achieve university education (even though it is certainly not impossible, as Jeanette's case confirms), the way one dresses is something that can be changed quite easily. It is thus this specific "fashionscape", to paraphrase Appadurai again, that provides most of the ethnographic examples of how the Imaginary West is created and incorporated into everyday social interac-

tions. I have described and analyzed this process in detail elsewhere (Heřmanová 2010).

III. Technologies of Communication, Technologies of Imagination

Imagination was traditionally seen in the history of social science as an individual ability and comprehended in the tradition of the philosophical concept of Immanuel Kant as a basic capacity of the human mind that enables us to perceive *and* synthetize what we are perceiving into knowledge. Kant's concept of the imagination as a capacity of the mind is also especially important from an analytical point of view, because it implies that there is no knowledge *without* imagination. As Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen point out (2009: 12), this processual view on the imagination as a basic aspect of our perception of reality allows us to connect the way we perceive our immediate surroundings with the way we imagine things, people or situation we have never encountered before. Imagination in a Kantian perspective is a "capacity involved in everything from the basic perception of objects to our engagement with entirely immaterial knowledge" (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen 2011: 12). From this point of view, there is no qualitative difference between what Bonfil Batalla would call the "profound" and the "imaginary" – both are imagined, perceived and built out of the concrete observations of an individual mind. Just as the "Imaginary West" is imagined, so the Soviet reality lived by Yurchak's subjects is imagined out of different sources, and just as my informants imagine what life in Europe looks like, so they have specific imageries about their own lives that they deploy in their life strategies. Yet, even though the tool we use to place ourselves in our immediate social environment may be generated by the same capacity of imagining that we use when dreaming about different and distant destinations we have never seen, the effects these two processes create are very different. What are these effects and how can we empirically show their difference is the topic of the following section.

The Imaginary West probably does not look and feel the same to Jeanette, as it does to Cristina or to any other indigenous girl or boy from the colonías. Every person has their own version based on different observations and different sources. For Jeanette, who did not care much about clothing, the movies and magazines were her most used source (together with conversations with me and also a friend of hers, who actually moved to Europe and who will be mentioned later). For Cristina and her sister, clothes were very important – in general, clothes were a topic for girls and also a topic that was easily broached in conversation with girls I did not know so well or maybe had just chatted with a few times in the city centre while they were working. For boys, clothing was important in reference to their favourite music bands or sports' celebrities – both national and internation-

al. It is interesting from this point of view, that a popular Mexican rock band could be easily incorporated into the landscape of "Imaginary West", because it belongs to the same sphere in the eyes of my informants – it shares the same characteristics of being unattainable, attractive and associated with people who live in the city and have a different lifestyle (and it does not really matter if the city is the Mexican capital or if it is New York – again, the reference to the "West" does not have anything to do with the geographical West, and not just because the whole US is more "North" for Mexicans).

The Imaginary West thus does not create a "landscape" in the sense of a space, with borders and rules that apply consistently. Its various features are very concrete, because they are imagined by concrete people and they are based on their own different experiences: thus, cars would be more important for Carlos, while clothes and movies define what Cristina and Jeanette see in the Imaginary West. But the fact that the Imaginary West is not a homogeneous space with characteristics shared by everyone who participates in it does not imply that there are as many Imaginary Wests as there are people who imagine them – the real power of the Imaginary West lies precisely in the fact that it assumes collective and shared meaning, in a way very similar to Anderson's imagined community of a nation-state.

The "Imaginary West" could be characterized by what Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen call an "external imaginary" – a "space spanning between persons and things… such external spaces are often constitutive of imaginative projects, as they serve to delineate particular vistas on which that which is imagined assumes its form" (2009: 14). The landscape of the imaginary West is a collective space constituted by many particular, concrete and personal situations, encounters and experiences that create concrete imageries (such as the one about people having a certain type of cars or girls wearing a certain type of clothes or university students doing specific things, like having coffee with fellow classmates) – but these imageries are placed in a space that is external to personal and unique experiences and transcends them. It is only in these external, shared spaces of an imagined community that the concrete situations start to make sense and "assume their form". The Imaginary West is collective and at the same time is created in specific, concrete and unique ways that could be described as "technologies of imagination – [the] diverse manner through which imaginative effects are engendered" (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen 2009: 16).

In the previous sections, I have described how the Imaginary West is created out of conversations with tourists (or with me and other similar actors), magazines and images of celebrities. For example, Cristina's job (selling souvenirs to tourists in the city centre) here thus presents a specific technology that creates a concrete effect – and this effect, together with similar effects created by different

technologies such as TV series, movies or the Internet are the building blocks of the landscape of the Imaginary West. It is, however, through examining the last "technology" – the Internet (that is conveniently a technology in both senses of the word) that the specific imaginative effect and its difference from everyday imaginative knowledge about immediate one's social environment can be analysed.

Over the course of the last few years, the Internet has become massively available in in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. When I first visited the city in 2007, there were of course some internet cafés and the more expensive hotels in the centre provided wireless service. In 2013, on the other hand, there was a public wi-fi network covering the whole city centre and Internet cafés could be found at every corner, even in the Zona Norte. There are of course many ways in which connection to the Internet is used among my informants (because, as Miller points out, the Internet is always reinvented locally by its users, 2012: 19), but here I choose to analyse one specific way of using it – communication via social networking sites (mostly Facebook, though Whatsapp is also widely used in Mexico, while in the Czech Republic it is not that popular). The reason why the most common use of the Internet among the inhabitants of Zona Norte is social networking is perhaps very pragmatic – most inhabitants of Zona Norte do not own a personal computer or a laptop, but a cheap smartphone is available to them. Writing emails or reading articles (two other common online activities of my informants) is much more comfortable on a computer screen, but Facebook can be easily used on a smartphone (and Facebook messenger and the Whatsapp app are even intended for mobile use only).

When I was in San Cristóbal in 2008, I had just created my own Facebook profile because I was to be far away from home for a longer period of time and wanted to stay in touch with my friends – almost all of whom had a Facebook profile at the time. At the time, none of Cristina, Natalia or their brothers, (or any of my friends in San Cristóbal) had ever heard of it. I used to teach them how to use email, because they wanted to learn, but all the courses were too expensive for them. In 2013, all of my acquaintances in San Cristóbal were equipped with a smartphone that they used solely for online communication via Facebook, Whatsapp or Gmail chat – they usually had no money to pay for credit to be able to make phone calls or send text messages, but due to the free wi-fi in the city centre or in some places, like shops, cafés or libraries, they were constantly communicating online. A smartphone had become standard "equipment" for all the *vendedoras* in the city centre. They used it as a source of entertainment during the long periods of waiting for customers and they also collected pictures – situations in which an indigenous seller would take a selfie of herself and a random tourist who had just bought something from her is nowadays a common sight in the city centre. Many of them would then post the picture to Facebook immediately (again,

there might be a practical reason for this – there is wi-fi in the city centre, while there is no connection at the homes in Zona Norte). Sometimes, they would also ask the random tourist for her name so they could "befriend" them on Facebook – though not all the *vendedoras* have the courage to do this.

Social networking sites like Facebook or Whatsapp are important in the context of this article, because they stress one of the most important characteristics of the Imaginary West, mentioned in almost every situation in which the lifestyle of tourists, or of myself or of one of my friends here in Europe, was discussed by my informants. Because of their ability to mediate a long-distance contact, social networks target *mobility* – or rather the lack of it. Mobility as a specific feature of the Imaginary West also works as a very good example of the different effects various imaginative processes have. While there is no qualitative difference between the imagined reality of everyday life in Zona Norte and the imagined reality of everyday life in the Imaginary West, there is a difference, even a gap, between the effect of the first (being in Zona Norte and sending messages over Facebook to Europe) and the second (actually being in Europe). What Facebook thus creates in my research site is a situation that is new both to me and my informants. Besides the fact that they are now supplied with images from my life even when I am not "there", when I am not in Mexico with them, they are also constantly confronted with the fact that I can choose to be physically distant or close to them (because I can afford to buy a flight ticket), while they can only be mobile while online. They can send me a Facebook message, but they cannot come to visit me – and the fact that I (or anyone they encounter in the city centre, while selling him or her a bracelet or a blouse) can do both, constitutes one of the most important characteristics of the lifestyle of the inhabitants of the "Imaginary West".

The issue of mobility is not particularly new in the young people from Zona Norte's negotiations of their own identity and their relationship to their social environment. Stories of migration and moving are common in the family histories, because they have all moved from mountain villages surrounding San Cristóbal in recent decades. In the generation of my informants, however, these stories are seen as a distant past that has nothing to do with their present situation – they were born in the city (or the majority of them were, and those who were not came to the city as very small children and do not remember much about life in their original communities). While their relationships to the villages from which their parents came vary from complete disinterest to politically shaped proclamations about their "indigenous" roots, they consciously perceive and present themselves as "urban youth" (Heřmanová 2010). While internal migration in Chiapas is mostly seen as family history, international migration is perceived as a current issue, but is not so common in Chiapas – the most southerly state of Mexico, bordering

Guatemala and thousands of kilometres from the infamous wall at the US-Mexican border – as it is in the rest of Mexico. One of the reasons that seem plausible to explain this is the financial cost of the journey – for a Tzotzil woman from Zona Norte, even the journey to Ciudad de México is almost impossible due to the price of the bus tickets, and the journey to the North of Mexico to the border with the US would cost more than a family might need for food for months.

On the other hand, many of the *vendedoras* have travelled for work – Cristina and Natalia's family, for example, had spent a few months working in Guadalajara, and Natalia remembered a period when she used to accompany her mother to work in Cancún when she was little. Although the girls would recount these travels with excitement, they were clear about their mission – in the end, it was just another way to make money and survive for a few more months, and there was always a great risk that the money paid for the bus ticket would not be earned back if they did not sell enough in the destination city. The difference between a worker going somewhere in order to find a means of subsistence and a tourist going for a holiday is very clearly articulated. The kind of mobility that characterizes the inhabitants of the Imaginary West is seen as qualitatively different – even if just for the simple fact that the tourist is someone who chooses his or her own destination for pleasure, for fun or for other comfortable reasons, a luxury a mere economic migrant never has.[14]

The feature of mobility ascribed to the Imaginary West is thus a special kind of mobility that is not available to the inhabitants of Zona Norte for many reasons – mostly because they do not have the financial resources. While social media and online communication tools in general are often used in the context of mobility by economic migrants to maintain contact with their families back home (Miller and Madianou 2012), in the context of my research the use of social media is based on a relationship built the other way around – from the people who stay in relation to the people who move (voluntarily, in this case).

Once, I asked Cristina about her relationship to the tourists – does she like talking to them? And why? "Of course we like it! It's the most fun part of the boring job we have here! Nothing never happens here. I'll probably never go to Europe, but I can at least try to persuade somebody to send me a postcard!", her sister Natalia jumped into the conversation and both girls started to laugh. Then Cristina pulled out her mobile phone and showed me a picture of a blonde girl wearing one of the bracelets she sold: "Look, this is what my friend from California sent me just yesterday!" She looks at her sister and says: "She wants postcards, because she

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14 Zygmunt Bauman (1998) develops the distinction between tourists and vagabonds – while the first move around the globe for pleasure, the last do so out of necessity. ''The tourists move because they want to, the vagabonds because they have no other bearable choice'' (p. 93, italics in the original text). I think this distinction applies here quite accurately.

doesn't have Facebook, you know," Cristina laughed at her sister, who just rolled her eyes.

In this case – as in many other similar cases – an encounter with a tourist that maybe lasted for minutes or possibly for a few days, has a lasting influence on Cristina's life thanks to Facebook. She is trying to make as many "friends" during her work as possible, because the tourists she meets and their lifestories captured on social network profiles are an important source of both information and entertainment for her – including my own Facebook profile. She and her brother Carlos comment on almost every picture I post on Facebook, sometimes they even ask about articles that I link and that they do not understand. They also send me messages whenever they see I am online and since this would usually be late at night European time, it usually means that I am busy writing something and have no time for answering them properly. At first, I did not know how to deal with the situation. It even felt inappropriate to me to add my informants as my "Facebook friends" – it felt, for some reason, like crossing the line between my research and my personal life. They could see pictures from my holidays, pictures from my friends' birthday parties or pictures of my niece from my parents' garden. They witness situations in my life that they could never witness personally, that would remain hidden from them were it not for the online world we both share. I felt that it is not right to filter my Facebook content, because I do not want my informants to see what I really do when I am at home. But I needed to admit to myself that I was annoyed. I felt embarrassed just a few days ago when Carlos posted a picture of a cute puppy on my profile and I feel uncomfortable when Cristina comments on a picture of me and my sister in my parents' house, noting how big the house seems to her. Postill (2013), however, notes that this situation is one encountered by many researchers recently: "This architecture [of social media] results in a digitally mediated 'open plan' sociality, a duality of social intercourse in which formely discrete facets of our lives are now within the purview of our wider network. Increasingly, Facebook brings into the semi-public personal spaces of ethnographers two sets of significant others, namely the researched and the non-researched, sometimes even blurring the distinction between the two. This is the stuff of scientific insight – and potential trouble." Postill also notes that the virtual relationships that Facebook creates tends to be "awkward", precisely because they blur the lines between what is personal and what is public into a kind of semi-public representation. This is exactly what happened to me. But – as Postill notes, this is not only a cause of trouble, but also a point of scientific insight. In my case, the social media communication between me and my informants made the imaginary lifestyle that I, among many others, represent more accessible, at any time and even at long distance, but it did not make it any more *possible*, to recall again Appadurai's distinction between what is imaginable and what is possible. So what does it mean for Cristina that she can now reach me via Facebook any time, but

that she can still never reach me in the way I can reach her, by coming to visit me? And is my unwillingness to stay in touch with her after I leave my field behind and go home, something to do with my privilege of mobility? How does Cristina's constant online contact with my life in Prague change her attitude towards the Imaginary West as my homeland and her dream destination? In short, how do the effects of online and offline imaginary worlds interact? Besides being fundamentally "awkward", Facebook also enables us to explore these questions.

IV. Imagining Mobility or "Being Stuck in San Cristóbal"

In the last few years, an interesting discussion has been going on in anthropology about how to study ethnographically the virtual worlds of online communities and what does the "virtual" actually mean for the anthropological examination of social reality. The study of online imaginary worlds poses many important epistemological and methodological challenges that have generated a lot of attention in the last decade.[15] Recently, a few authors have noted that the sub-discipline of digital anthropology, however, treats the study of virtual worlds from a very problematic point of view – starting from the idea that we cannot and should not treat the virtual and the physical as distinct and separate (Boellstorf 2012: 40). Gabriella Coleman summarises this perspective when she notes that "the bulk of this work, however, continues to confound sharp boundaries between off-line and online contexts" (Coleman 2010: 492, quoted in Boellstorf 2012: 41). The imperative to study online worlds in their offline context, that has been set up as the main task of digital anthropology, often leads to the conclusion that the two cannot be separated at all and that in our digital age, online and offline are blurred together, and our virtual identity is part of our everyday life to such an extent that it becomes an organic, inseparable part of our personality and our social life.

Gabriela Coleman noted (2010) that the presumption of blurred lines between online and offline partly comes from the fact that most of the work in digital media and communication technologies has been done in North America and Europe, amongst people who are privileged in their access to technological resources and Internet connection. The digital reality of marginalized people all around the world, however, shows a different picture that is more in correspondence with Appadurai's distinction between the "imaginable" and the "possible" mentioned above. Tom Boellstorff, who was one of the first anthropology scholars to have done ethnographic research in virtual space (an early version of Second Life) but whose main research area lies in Indonesia, notes that "the idea that online and offline could fuse makes as much sense as semiotics whose followers would anticipate the collapsing of the gap between sign and referent, imagining a day when

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15 For an exhaustive overview see Horst, and Miller 2012: 3 nn (Introduction).

words would be the same thing as that which they denote" (Boellstorff 2012: 42).[16] Boellstorff also quotes Miller and his observation from fieldwork in Trinidad: "forms of expression can take place on Facebook, but the space of Facebook and the space of /Trinidad/ do not thereby collapse into each other. You can still be on Facebook without being in Trinidad and you can be in Trinidad without being on Facebook."

My analysis of the online mobility of young indigenous people in San Cristóbal and the offline mobility of the inhabitants of the "Imaginary West" provides another example. When speaking about my life in Prague, Jeanette always said to me that she feels "stuck" in San Cristóbal. Right after our conversation about movies and how she compares them to what she thinks life in Europe looks like, she told me a story about a friend who was half Tzeltal, but married a guy from Switzerland and went to live with him in Europe. She was in close contact with her via emails and I heard the story many times afterwards. In fact I heard it so many times that it annoyed me in the end, she was obsessed with it and every time I would mention something, she would react "yes, my friend, you know, the one who married Marco, she also tells me that she does this or that in Switzerland." I even asked her once why she mentioned her friend so often – was she maybe a good friend of hers and she is upset that she has left? But Jeanette said that they were not really that close, but "of course I am upset she's left. Because I am stuck here and I have no prospect of ever leaving San Cristóbal." In other words, she felt even more stuck because of the fact that her friend was now sending her emails from Switzerland. Her offline world in San Cristóbal and the online images of a life in distant Switzerland could not have been less blurred – on the contrary, email communication with her friend made the distinction even more visible and sharp for Jeanette.

This internal debate inside the discipline about the interaction of online and offline modes of our existence leads back to the question of the effects of various technologies of imagination. From an analytical point of view, both online and offline worlds are perceived by us in the same way. Horst and Miller (2012: 12) note the importance of this analytical aspect when they say that every human communication, be it personal or internet-mediated, is always mediated by many channels and frames – but we fail to see this, because in face-to-face interaction these frames work so effectively. Horst and Miller are thus effectively going back to Kant and his notion of the imagination as a basic human capacity that precedes any kind of knowledge that we are able to extract from the world of objects, both

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16 Boellstorff also suggests that digital anthropology can overcome this misleading tendency by using what he calls an indexical theory of understanding – borrowed from philosophy and semiotics – for understanding the relationship between virtual and actual. In his concept, the virtual serves as an index for the actual, in a way similar to the way in which a word serves as an index for an object – see Boellstorff 2012: 50nn.

material and immaterial. We are not able to be in "non-mediated" contact with each other, because our interactions are always framed by our sociocultural background, just as we are not able to have non-mediated knowledge about the world, because we are always imagining shapes and possible meanings in what we see and feel. "Just as we construct meanings, we *imagine* realities and this, we might say, is the only way in which we are able to perceive them" (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen 2009: 12). The Imaginary West is thus not any less "real" or "present" to my informants than the houses of Zona Norte. Both realities are mediated and imagined. But that also does not mean that they would "collapse into each other", to quote Miller. Jeanette's life in San Cristóbal is shaped by her perception of her own position in it, is imagined through the lens of her family history, her education and her personal experience. Life in Europe is imagined through the lens of magazines, films and email conversations with a friend who lives there. Both realities are mediated, but they are not, in any aspect at all, blurred. They may be built from the same ontological foundatings, but their difference lies in the effects they have on the life of my informants. These effects are also the only way to access the impact of imagination in social life empirically.

Mobility is an excellent example of this effective difference. The ability to move long distances is such a prominent feature of the landscape of the Imaginary West precisely because it stresses the practical impossibility of moving on the part of those who are imagining it. Social networks connect my informants to distant places, but every Facebook message they send me reminds them of the fact that our connection remains purely virtual and no matter what they do in the virtual world, it will not move them from where they are. The effects of the Imaginary West on their life thus become more visible than ever before, because they are constantly reminded of the profound gap between what is possible online and offline. As Cristina herself said in one of our Facebook exchanges, when commenting on a picture of my niece taken in the garden of my parents' house: "That's really nice, Mari. It's great that I can see you parents' house, though it's not like I can actually go there..." (followed by an incredible amount of emoticons that she uses all the time). "I'll come to visit you soon," I reply after a while, because I do not know what else to say and then it occurs to me that it was probably the worst possible answer. But she just sends another smiley face.

Conclusion

Over the preceding pages, I have attempted to develop the concept of the "Imaginary West" as it is created and lived by a group of young indigenous people in the suburbs of the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. While the notion of the "Imaginary West" comes from Alexei Yurchak (2005) and his analysis of the cultur-

al background of the breakdown of the Soviet regime, the "Imaginary West" as it is described here constitutes a twist on Anderson's notion of an imagined community (Anderson 1983). It is created out of lot of diverse material and in many different ways – from conversations with tourists in the city centre, from movies and TV series and also, most importantly in the context of this article, from social network communication between my informants and the tourist friends they encounter while working in the city centre.

The Imaginary West can also be compared to what Arjun Appadurai (1994) calls "imaginary worlds" – though Appadurai also tracks his concept back to Anderson. Anderson's notion of an imagined community is very useful also, because he illustrates it with a vast amount of empirical material and also traces various technologies that are used by members of an imagined community to build a sense of belonging. Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen mention the example of Anderson's analysis in their introduction to "Technologies of imagination" (2009). They propose an understanding of such technologies as "diverse manners through which imaginative effects are engendered" (2009: 16), which allows us to study the effect of imaginative practices on social reality ethnographically. The imagination as such is a capacity of an individual mind, as is noted already in Kant's thinking about the imagination, but the effects of the imagination assume their forms in what Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen call an "external imaginary" or what Charles Taylor previously studied as the "social imaginary" (Sneat, Holbraad and Pedersen 2012).

It is interesting that in the case of my fieldwork, as is also the case in Anderson's famous analysis of imagined communities, the technologies of imagination are "technologies" in every sense of the word. Anderson tracks the origin of nationalistic thinking back to the invention of printed books or to the use of geographical maps in Western colonies in Asia. The Imaginary West I have attempted to present in this article is constructed among other things through the use of online communication technologies, mainly social networking sites such as Facebook or social apps such as Whatsapp. The "imaginary" in it thus seemingly overlaps with the "online" or sometimes the "virtual".

The anthropology of online worlds has undergone a very interesting debate about how to study empirically the online identities and interactions of social actors and how to capture the difference between online and offline modes of existence without blurring them together, as has been the case in many recent studies (see Coleman 2010) or conversely, without seeing them as ontologically different and incomparable.

My example based on one of the eminent features of the Imaginary West – the mobility of its inhabitants – aims to show that it is again through the practical *effects* that the online and offline worlds have that we can capture and study ethno-

graphically their role in the social life of our informants. The concept of "technologies of imagination" applied to the social media communication of structurally disadvantaged and marginalized people, such as the inhabitants of the poor suburbs of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, can provide a deep ethnographic insight into the practical effects of imaginary worlds on the social life of people and the way in which the imaginary, the online and the offline interact on an everyday basis.

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