THE INVISIBLE CITY: THREE STORIES ABOUT URBAN MARGINALITY FROM SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS, MÉXICO[1]

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Abstract: ***The so-called Zona Norte on the outskirts of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in the south of México represents a typical "poverty belt" described in the literature on Latin American favelas and slums. An area densely populated by Tzotzil- and Tzeltal-speaking people, migrants from the rural communities from the surrounding highlands, Zona Norte is, in many ways, a typical example of an informal urban settlement, and it bears the stigma usually attached to these places – a lawless, dangerous, no-go zone. The aim of this article is to present three different examples of how this territorial stigmatisation (Wacquant 2008) is experienced, lived, reconstructed, and deconstructed by three generations of inhabitants in Zona Norte. Central to all the stories is the metaphor of "invisibility" or the "invisible city", which is analysed using concepts from current anthropological literature on urban informality. The article is based on an extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in San Cristóbal de Las Casas between the years 2008–2015.***

Keywords: ***urban informality; urban marginality; rural-urban migration; urban poverty; México; Chiapas; indigenous people***

On a very early sunny morning in September 2013, I was walking on a steep footpath between *colonia* La Hormiga and the neighbouring *colonia* San Juan del Bosque with María and her grandson Juanito. We were taking Juanito to school, located at the edge of La Hormiga, one of the highest places in the Zona Norte. *Colonias* are neighbourhoods of Zona Norte, an extensive belt of settlement at the North-West of the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in

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Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas. From where we walk with María, we have a view over the whole city – the lower parts of Zona Norte in the flatlands around the *periférico*, main highway circling the city, the old colonial city centre with its palaces and churches and colourful houses with thatched roofs. When we reach the playground in front of the school, we spot a few other women with their children and the teacher standing among them, talking animatedly. It turned out that the school was closed because the teachers had decided to join the national strike against the reform of the educational system in Mexico that President Peña Nieto was trying to implement. Massive protests were taking place on the main square in Mexico City, and it seemed that the strike had reached even such remote corners of the country as San Cristóbal's suburbs. After a short negotiation with the teacher, María announced: "Well, it looks like we have nothing to do here today, so let's take a walk! I heard there are some new houses over there!" and she was already ten metres ahead of me on the pathway. We were walking in the direction of San Antonio del Monte, one of the *colonias* founded in 1980s by the refugees from the municipality of Chamula. Religious conflicts between the new Protestant churches represented by missionaries from the US and Canada and the traditional cargo system in the indigenous communities based on the syncretic tradition of *catholicismo tradicionale maya* were among the main reasons that caused the first wave of rural-urban migration in Chiapas – the converts left the communities and founded the first *colonías* at the suburbs of the city.

I have previously synthetised the general reasons of the internal migration and consequently the suburbanisation of San Cristóbal and the creation of Zona Norte, in the process finding the three research areas discussed in most of the studies on the topic (Heřmanová 2010). They are, however, strongly interconnected and mutually dependent: 1) Changes in the sociopolitical organisations in the region of Altos de Chiapas led to changes in ownership structures, to the creation of agricultural cooperatives (*ejidos*), and in some cases, to conflicts over the most important resource in Chiapas: land. The consequence of the conflicts, together with other land-concerning aspects of development (the construction of roads and general infrastructure in the region), led to an overall reorganisation of economic structure, employment structure, and the creation of new economical elites. 2) The differentiation of the economic sector significantly influenced the complex system of political administration in the communities, which is closely connected to religion through the practice of the system of cargoes. At the same time, the missionaries started to work in the

region, and conversion to other confessions became frequent – in some cases, this led to expulsions of the converted families from the communities. The new churches also played a significant role in the settlement of the refugees in the suburbs of San Cristóbal. 3) The global market economy reached Chiapas through an unprecedented influx of tourism, in this case ethnic and cultural tourism, which led to both the empowerment and the impoverishment of indigenous migrants in the city through the commodification of their cultural identity.

María's story was in this context rather typical in many aspects – she came to San Cristóbal when she was eighteen years old (or at least she guessed she might have been around eighteen then – I never got to know her exact age, because I doubt she knows it herself). She came with her mother and her eldest son Alejandro, and she left her drunken and violent husband behind, in a small village in the municipality of Chamula called Ichilhó. Ichilhó has around fifty inhabitants, and a third of them are María's relatives. The main means of subsistence in Ichilhó is agriculture – corn and coffee planting – but mostly people have just enough corn and hens to make just enough tortillas and eggs to feed themselves. Except for the eldest, Alejandro, all María's four other children were born in San Cristóbal, and they didn't know much about her life in Ichilhó. As she explained to me, she "wasn't religious" back in Ichilhó – meaning that she belonged, like everyone else, to the cargo system based on traditional Maya beliefs blended with Catholicism. She met a pastor of her current church (the Pentecostal movement founded in the US) on her visits to the city, and once she decided to convert, she came into conflict with her family (and was beaten by the village authorities). That, together with the alcohol addiction of her husband, made her leave the small community where she was born and head to the city.

The story of the colonisation of San Cristóbal's suburbs by migrants from indigenous communities from the surrounding Highlands of Chiapas in many ways mirrors similar processes in other parts of Latin America, as well as elsewhere in the world, described by a significant body of anthropological literature on urban informality and marginality. Many studies explored, for example, the inner socio-political organisation of informal urban settlements (for example Goldstein 2003), the role of gender or the presence, symbolism, and significance of violence (for example Shepher-Hughes 1992). In my own research, I have focused on the dynamics of the relationships between the marginalised urban area, which Zona Norte certainly represents, towards the city

outside of it, and I have explored the dualism of “the city” and “the non-city”[2]. How do the inhabitants of the marginalised urban areas place themselves in the infrastructure of the city, and how do they negotiate their place in the urban space were some of my main research questions. In this article, I’d like to present three different stories based on the narratives of three different generations of the inhabitants of Zona Norte, and use them to illustrate the complex dynamics of the relationships of the suburbs and the city centre, the formal and the informal city, the centre and the periphery. Central to all of these stories is the metaphor of invisibility, or the “invisible city”, which will be analysed in the conclusion.

1. Juana María’s Story and the Colonisation of La Hormiga

Juana María Ruiz Ortiz is one of the original founders of La Hormiga, and one of the first wave of inhabitants of Zona Norte. She now teaches at the Chiapas Autonomous University (Universidad Autonoma de Chiapas), and she has recounted the story of the first settlements in Zona Norte in various books and academic articles (Ruiz Ortiz 1996). She represents one of the rare indigenous voices in the academic research on the indigenous presence in the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. I met with her on a sunny afternoon in her office on the university campus, and she told me the story of how she came to live in San Cristóbal.

“There are many voluntary migrants. The people came for jobs, many came to complete their education. Mostly, we left the villages because there just wasn’t anything for us anymore. The land was scarce, and there is no other way to survive up there in the mountains. We came out of necessity,” she recounts. Juana María is one of the three original owners of land in La Hormiga – today on of the biggest colonias located on the northern hillside, right above the periférico, the main highway encircling the city centre on its southern side and cutting right through the middle of Zona Norte. Many of the colonias built during the first wave of migration between 1975 and 1985 were built on the steep stretch of land lined by the periférico to the south and the main road to San Juan Chamula on the western edge.[3] La Hormiga and San Juan del Bosque

[2] In reference to Marc Augé’s non-places (Augé 1995).

[3] The *periférico*/city circle wasn’t built until 1976, and before that the hillsides surrounding the valley of Jovel, where the colonial city of San Cristóbal was located, were mostly inaccessible.

are the two oldest and best-known colonias, built there approximately at the same time. Juana María started to negotiate the purchase of her own piece of land in 1980, but it took a whole two years for the legal matters to be settled. In her recounting of the foundation of La Hormiga (Ruiz Ortiz 1996: 11), she remembers the three owners of the land she and two other Tzotzil men wanted to buy, all three of them heirs to the land from old colonial families. Juana María was one of the first buyers, together with Domingo Lopéz Angel, the leader of religious refugees from Chamula and founder of an organization called CRIACH (Consejo de Representantes Indígenas de Los Altos de Chiapas), which plays a significant role in the organisation of colonias to this day. Juana María, Domingo Lopéz Angel, and all of the original buyers of land in La Hormiga and the neighbouring colonias have paid for their plot – Juana María told me that the amount of money (around 3,000 pesos in 1980) was astronomical for them at the time, "but we had no other option then to get the money together. We had to do it, I had no other place to go," she says. Hvostoff (2001) also recounts many similar stories of the first migrants, who sometimes stayed in rented rooms and saved money for a small piece of land in one of the colonias. Hvostoff mentions that the relationship between the indigenous tenants and the *ladino* owners who rented to them was very tense, and the living conditions were horrible. The most infamous case of a settlement in the Calle Francisco Guzman, equipped with four toilets and three washbasins and rented to 450 indigenous families, is also documented in Juana María's story (Hvostoff 2001: 48, Ruiz Ortiz 1996: 14).

The hardships of acquiring financial resources and building a house were not the only concerns of the new inhabitants of the city. The relationship of the *ladinos* who inhabited the city centre to the indigenous population, which used to be problematic even in times when the indigenous people merely visited the city and its markets to work there, started to shift – the *indígenas* started to be perceived as a threat and a danger to the order of things, and the cultural racism of local elites developed sharper contours. The complex relationship between the mestizos, the ladinos, and the indigenous in the era before the suburbanisation and colonisation of Zona Norte was brilliantly analysed in the now classic article by van den Berghe and Benjamin N. Colby, "Ethnic Relations in Southeastern Mexico," published in American Anthropologist in 1961. Van den Berghe and Colby describe how the *coletos*, the local upper-class families, prided themselves on being genetically of Spanish origin, being sometimes also called *gente bien* (good people), *la crema* (the cream), or *los blancos* (the whites). They ruled over the middle class of mestizos, the "mixed ones", and most importantly over the

indios, the lower class. But as the authors point out, genetic characteristics were not the primary criteria of social status: "While the town is rigidly stratified, and its inhabitants strongly class-conscious, wealth (as indexed by dress, landownership, type of house, number of servants etc.), education (as shown by literacy, correctness of speech, university degree, manners, etc.) are more important than the physical appearance in determining one's status" (Van den Berge – Colby 1961: 772). Even though racial and class criteria overlap here, the most important aspect of the organisation of the hierarchy of the city was not the strictly racial point of view, but rather the cultural one. The ladinos (even the most liberal ones) had taken their superiority for granted, but they never based it on genetics (even though they prided themselves on their "Spanish origins"): "The rationalization of the superiority is almost always cultural . . . the ladino group is characterized by its possession of the local variant of Spanish culture, not by any racial traits" (Van den Berghe – Colby 1961: 774, 783). The physical appearance of a mestizo and an indígena would be hard for any outsider to discern – so an indigenous person, if he or she learns to speak Spanish fluently and dress accordingly, could sometimes pass as a lower-class mestizo. Most indigenous people were, of course, due to their poverty, excluded from the middle and upper class, but the ideology provided the opportunity for social mobility, at least in theory. That is why Van den Berghe and Colby label the ethnic relationship between the indigenous and non-indigenous population in Chiapas as "paternalistic": the ladinos treat the indigenous as primitive, uncultured, but with a touch of affection – as unreliable, childish, and ignorant, but not dangerous (Van den Berghe – Colby 1961: 789). But this, of course, changed when the indigenous people started to build permanent settlements in the city – the paternalistic relationship changed to an openly racist one, and the indigenous element started to be perceived as dangerous. According to the stories of my informants, Juana María included, and stories gathered by other researchers (most notably Aubry 1991), the deterioration of interethnic relations was manifested on two levels – in the very dismissive attitude of the municipal government to the new settlements, and as well on the personal level, in everyday interactions.

If La Hormiga is again to be taken as an example, the attitude of the government is symptomatic. Since 1982, the inhabitants of the colonia, Juana María among them, tried to negotiate the construction of infrastructure in La Hormíga. All attempts at acquiring access to the municipal electricity and the potable water network were in vain. Juana María recounts one of many

negotiations with the city officials: "They wouldn't hear about it. They showed us the map of the city, and of course La Hormiga wasn't on the map. One of them, I don't remember his name anymore, but I think he was a lawyer, told us, 'As far as I am concerned, this place doesn't exist.' Can you imagine that? I invested all my money, everything I had in that house. And this man was telling me that it doesn't exist!" I answered honestly that I was not able to imagine such a situation and I just wondered why the government was so stubborn about it. Juana María smiled bitterly: "Why? I asked them why they didn't want us here and I wish I hadn't. The lawyer started to shout at us, saying that we are *pinches indios* (fucking indigenous) and that we only contaminate the land there, that we contaminate the natural resources that belong to his city. But we didn't come here to contaminate! We came out of necessity. But they told us that we were here to contaminate their land." Juana María recounts that she encountered the racism everywhere, not just at the offices of the municipality. "You know, just the fact that we can walk the streets today is a success. We couldn't walk the same streets as ladinos back then. We were treated as dirt, and there are a lot of people who still remember it very clearly," she says.

The struggle for electricity took an unexpected turn in 1994. The network was already built, but the city hall refused to connect it to the municipal source. And then – Juana María makes a dramatic pause here, when she tells me this story – the Zapatistas came[4]. The masked indigenous guerilla from the jungle, led by the charismatic Subcommandante Marcos, turned attention to San Cristóbal not only from the federal Mexican government, but also from the whole world, international media, and the international anti-globalisation movement (for example Speed 2007, Guiomar 2009). "And that was it – they saved us. We had electricity like the next day probably. We weren't hopeless

[4] The Zapatista movement was born in the Lacandón jungle in the 1980s, but only became known to the world on 1 January 1994 – on this day, the masked indigenous guerilleros left the jungle and seized 7 different cities in Chiapas, including San Cristóbal. There was never any open armed conflict between the Zapatistas and the Mexican Federal Army, but there was – and still is – violence and conflicts around the Zapatista autonomous territory, spread in small islands in the Lacandon jungle. The meaning of the Zapatista movement however lies mostly in its global popularity – they were by far the first social movement to fully take advantage of the internet. They use magical realism symbolism for their fight for social justice and indigenous rights (see later in the text), and dispose of a vast network of international supporters, including many Zapatista support groups in Europe and the United States. "Revolutionary tourism" is now omnipresent in San Cristóbal. For the general history and the socio-economic context of the Zapatista movement, see, for example, Collier (1994) or Díaz (1996), for a more in-depth analysis of the international Zapatista network, for example Leyva Solano (1998) or Mentinis (2006).

anymore. The municipal officers saw what could happen if they ignored us – so they just couldn't ignore us anymore. And we have the EZLN to thank for the fact that our houses aren't dark in the night anymore." The water infrastructure, however, was never negotiated with the municipality. The inhabitants of La Hormiga collected money among themselves and paid for the conduit that is connected to the public wells. "We are independent." Juana María smiled. "We built it, it's ours, and we do not depend on city hall anymore."

The story of the settlement of La Hormiga and the negotiations of the settlers with the local authorities about how the colonia can (or cannot) be connected to the city infrastructure provides a good example of the relationship between the colonias on the periphery and the old colonial city centre. The new indigenous settlers were seen as parasitic, dangerous, and unwanted. At the same time, their presence in the city presented a significant economic asset for the local economy – not only did they represent a significant new workforce, they also played an important role in the developing tourism industry in the region. San Cristóbal is praised as being the heart and the mecca of ethnic tourism, and the indigenous presence in the city is often described in tourist guides as the "mystic" aspect that makes the city so popular with tourists (see also Robledo Hernández 2008, Heřmanová 2010, 2018). Indigenous women in traditional *trajes* (costumes) are as much a part of the atmosphere of San Cristóbal as are its cobbled streets and picturesque houses. San Cristóbal's indígenas are being marketed as one of its many charms. Yet they are also the unwanted and unwelcome denizens of Zona Norte, stigmatised as being unpredictable and parasitic. It requires a system of complex power distribution to hold the indigenous element in its dual position – on the outskirts, in the "poverty belt", yet simultaneously in the centre, where it is demanded by the visitors and, subsequently, by the economic ecosystem of the whole city, which relies on tourism. That is what María's story is about.

2. María's Story and the Negotiations with City Hall

Many hours of my fieldwork were spent at San Cristóbal's main square, the *zocalo*, talking with the indigenous women and their daughters who worked there as so-called *vendedoras*, or vendors. They specialised in handcrafted souvenirs – embroidered blouses, woolen sweaters, scarves, bracelets and necklaces made from dried corn and coffee beans. The selling could be done in two different ways – first, as so-called *comercio ambulante*, practised mostly

by younger girls. They carried all their merchandise with them, on their backs, bracelets and necklaces wrapped around their hands, as they walked on the main pedestrian zones in the city centre, stopped by in cafés and shops, talked to the tourists, offered them their goods. The mothers, the older vendedoras, would come in the evening. While the girls were walking, the mothers would bring big sheets of plastic with them, which they would spread out on the ground, at the zócalo or in the nearby park. The children came with them – they stumbled and toddled around, being cared for collectively by everyone in the group. The women worked in groups and they obviously knew each other – they took the same position on the square every day, gathered their daughters, and started to display all the goods on the sheets. The organisation of the work throughout the day flowed smoothly, and from the outside, it seemed like an organic process. However, it was, in fact, a highly organised one, requiring hours of negotiations with city hall and complex organisation among the indigenous women themselves.

In 2008, indigenous women vendors were allowed to walk around city centre during the day and lay out their merchandise on the ground to form an improvised marketplace every day after 6:00 p.m. In 2010, they were only allowed to sell "on the ground" only after 8:00 p.m., with different times during national holidays. In 2013, they were banned from selling in the city centre altogether, unless they walked and carried all their merchandise with them. The sight of a mother skilfully arranging dozens of sweaters on one arm, holding a bundle of necklaces on the other, and carrying a baby in a scarf on her back was not unusual – women walked the streets of the city centre like this all day long, every day, even when it rained. Many of the younger ones complained about it a lot. "If it weren't for my mum, I wouldn't go selling like this," said María's daughter Cristina. "I dislike this kind of job so much – you have to approach people and you only sell so little." However, if she were allowed to just pack all her merchandise, go to the city centre, and spread a sheet of plastic at the zócalo, she would go gladly – because she knew she would make money. Cristina argued with María about this regularly, but María was adamant – the money was needed every day, never mind the rain, the tiredness, and the need to approach hundreds of tourists.

The opportunity to sell officially, on the zócalo and "on the ground", was extremely important for the vendedoras. As Cristina and all the others knew, if they could display the sweaters, scarves, blouses, and jewellery on the big plastic sheets, it was very probable that people would stop, chat, and then buy

something. It was different from just walking around and trying to stop passers-by and force them to look at their goods. For Cristina and many other girls her age who did not have the resilience of their mothers, this way of working was awkward, uncomfortable, and annoying. But their mothers had to fight constantly with city hall to get permission for "on the ground" selling. This permission was never granted, and it made them anxious every time a permit ended, the official's decision changed, and their future became, once again, unsure. In December 2013, when the authorities completely banned selling in the city centre, the majority of the families I knew from the colonias became desperate. Selling is the means of subsistence for almost every woman in the Zona Norte and even for a few men – although men usually do not sell clothes, but rather cheap quesadillas and sweets. As Robledo Hernandéz (2009) notes, women became the main providers for many families throughout the process rural-urban migration. Selling in the city centre is a female occupation, and it is the one most easily accessible to the indígenas from Zona Norte – and very often also the only one. The ban on the selling activities in the city centre was thus a severe blow for many families, who lost their main source of income overnight. "We saw it coming," Verónica, one of the vendedoras, told me right before Christmas, which was usually the busiest tourist season in San Cristóbal, when Mexicans from all corners of the country came to Chiapas on family holiday. The domestic tourists, from the capital or the northern part of the country, spent the most, as Chiapas was cheap for them. Verónica was desperate, because she had hoped up until the last minute that she and her colleagues and friends, the other vendedoras, would win and they would be allowed to sell their merchandise, even if just for a few hours, a few times a week. "I still hope we can negotiate. They need us, the tourists come for us as well," she said confidently, but her anxiety was obvious.

Verónica was right – tourists came for the merchandise and for the atmosphere that she and her friends, with their colourful *trajes* and indigenous chatter, brought to the city centre. Ethnic tourism is the main type of tourism that generates income for the city. Yet the officials at the city hall and the mestizos in the city centre still would do a lot to prevent it. What looked from the outside like a rather spontaneous process – women arranging their goods on the ground, with children running around them and tourists walking through the crowd and picking up stuff – was rather a highly organised system of negotiations. Its main aim was to put the indigenous element in the city centre in a place where it could be controlled, regulated – and banned, if needed. It was also highly

organised and hierarchised on the other side, among the vendedoras themselves – the negotiations forced them to create formal groups, cooperativas, and elect leaders who could speak for the entire group. María was one of them – she was the head of the biggest cooperative and, as she very proudly recounted to me, went herself a few times to negotiate with the major. To untangle and describe the vendedoras' struggle for being able to move freely in the city centre and make their living thus sheds light on the complex relationship of the city to its peripheries and their inhabitants. It is a relationship based on economic needs, but burdened by racism, discriminatory practices, and manifestations of power. Through the practice of selling, the unwanted and informal space of Zona Norte that the *ladinos* do not want to see, reaches out towards the formal, colonial city, and the inhabitants of Zona Norte become part of the everyday life in it – and as much as this process is inevitable and might seem natural for the disinterested observer, it is also regulated, systematised, and hierarchised in order to reflect the power structure of the whole city.

The negotiations of the representatives of indigenous vendors with the local authorities have a long history. In a document sent to the governor of the State of Chiapas in October 2012, the cooperative Grupo de Artesanas Tejedoras de San Cristobal de Las Casas,[5] of which María serves as a president, states that they have been working since 1984 as "vendedores ambulantes" (on the streets, walking), and that they have been registered since 1998 as a "company." The document reacts to the fact that the municipal leader of San Cristobal at the time, Martínez Pedrero, was trying to severely limit the opportunities for selling: "He has left 148 families without jobs, and what's even worse, these families don't have any other sources of income. The only income is from the commercial activities, and it is the only source that supports our alimentary needs. The decision deprives us of our right to work, which no other previous administration has ever limited." The document is signed by four representatives of the group: two men and two women (María is one of them, and she also provided me with the documentation). It is accompanied by a list of all 148 members of the group, with signatures or with fingerprints (for those who cannot write). It is not entirely true that there had been no previous limitations – since the beginning (i.e., since the registration in 1998 that enabled women to sell on the ground and not only "ambulantly"), the "commercial activities" were limited there in various ways – mostly spatially (by assigning places where the

[5] The group of artisan weavers of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

merchandise can by displayed) and temporally (by limiting the on-the-ground sale to evening hours). But the first attempt to evict the vendedoras from the city centre altogether came in 2012. The then-president of the municipal council, Martínez Pedrero, is a member of a well-known mestizo family that owns many hotels and other services in the city centre. The Pedrero family was sometimes labelled as "mafia" by some of my informants, and there were many complaints about their activities ("they can buy anything they want, they own half of the city already," one of my friends told me.) He was a difficult opponent for María and her peers, and it took a lot of courage for her to openly complain about him – but given the fact that she and the rest of group did not exaggerate by stating that their families depended on the income from their sales to survive, she did not have much of a choice.

Since 2012, the vendedoras' activities were limited to national holidays only – probably because, as mentioned above, it is a high tourist season for San Cristóbal, with many Mexicans from all over the country coming to visit and buy cheap artisan products. In 2013, the group sent another request, this time to Pedrero personally, to demand the option of selling for another two years, not only during national holidays, but every day. Again, the documents mentioned that selling in the city centre was the only source of income for the families, and that they should have the same right to work as any citizen of Mexico. It also referred to the statement of the state Governor Manuel Velasco Coello, mentioning "a Chiapas that is united in its social, economic, labour, educational, and health services development. [...] We are sure that you, Mr. President, are on the same side with our governor. We want to remind you that our families do not need to eat only during national holidays, but every day, and this is why we ask you to reconsider our situation," the authors of the request pleaded.

This request was not successful. The city administrators issued a permit for commercial activities in the park in front of city hall during the summer holidays (the months of July and August) from 6:00 p.m. until midnight. There are five other restrictions included in the official document: the vendors cannot use any rugs, tables, or chairs, they cannot enter the city hall itself unless it is raining, they have to clean the area daily, and they are obliged to obey any instructions issued by the representatives of public authority present. The formal groups of vendors who received the permission were not allowed to sell ambulantly, during the day, for the period covered by the permit (and if they were to get caught doing so, the permit would cease to be valid immediately). There were

five registered groups of vendors in 2013, and when I visited San Cristóbal at the end of 2013, all of them were still waiting for their permit to sell during the Christmas holidays. The story of negotiations with city hall ended up in 2013 with the opening of a new marketplace, called Mercado de la Zona Norte – a vast space of permanent halls and stands, in the middle of Zona Norte, with direct access from the Periférico Norte. From a practical and physical perspective, it was much better than the plastic sheets on the ground in front of the Palacio Municipal or in the park. Concrete structures sheltered the vendors from rain (a frequent occurrence in San Cristóbal during the winter season) and other weather conditions. It was spacious and there were some basic services (like toilets, for example). But, as of the end of 2013, it was mostly empty. In the following years, they slowly became filled with vendors, artisan products, handmade products, fruits and vegetables, and tortillas. The Mercado of Zona Norte is operating – and the official city website put it on the list of places worth visiting in San Cristóbal. But while it means safer working conditions for the vendedoras, it also means that they were effectively sent back to Zona Norte, pushed out of the city centre and out of the sight of both locals and tourists. *Vendedoras ambulantes* still walk the streets of the city centre, representing the kind of ethnic tinge the city needs, in order to remain an important spot on the tourist map of Mexico.

The many obstacles and limits that direct what seems to be, to an outsider, a free movement of people around the city, could be analysed as manifestations of deep structural inequalities embedded in the socio-political system of the city. For example, Ann Varley (2012) writes about *postcolonialising informality* – a process that happens in many different informal settlements all around the world. The power distribution in places like San Cristóbal is influenced by the global market economy, in which the indigenous people and their culture are simply a commodity to be sold to the tourists, as well as by the historical context of colonialist cultural racism. The ethnographic evidence of the most obvious manifestations of this process – like the struggle of the indigenous women for their place in the urban economy, and through it, in the physical space of the city itself – then needs to be seen through the context of both recent (federal development programmes and the politics of indigeneity in México and all around Latin America) and not-so-recent (colonialist ideology) history.

3. Raymundo's Story and the Reclaiming of the Urban Space

The formation of the *cooperativas artesanales*, like the one María belonged to, is one of the most important steps in the process of organising the relationship of the colonias and the city centre. Once the women were able to gain a position of respect inside the community itself, they could also step out of it – and fight for their position outside of the domestic space. The cooperativas are also one of the many manifestations of the fact that the colonias are not, in fact, "lawless zones" or places without any social control and structure, as they are seen from the outside. There are other organisations operating in the colonias, representing its inhabitants in conflicts with city hall. I met a leader of one of them at a lecture given in San Cristóbal by a famous sociologist and supporter of the Zapatista movement, John Holloway. After the lecture, a friend introduced me to Damaso, a local activist and political leader and also the founder of the organisation called COCIDEP – Comité Ciudadana por la Defensa Publica (Civic Committee for Public Defence). As Damaso explained to me, "Our organisation is for the people and about the people from every barrio and colonía in this city." COCIDEP is formed by representatives of various districts of San Cristóbal – not only colonias, but also barrios, the old quarters of the colonial city centre. Damaso later explained to me that Zona Norte has its own coordinator and its own meetings, as their problems are different from those of the rest of the city – they are, however, still part of COCIDEP as a platform for organising the denizens of the city and solving their problems. The platform was founded in the hectic year of 1994, when the Zapatista uprising inspired many similar activities "from below." Its aim is to represent the interests of the people, as Damaso stated, as well as to unite them in their struggles against the municipal authorities. In practice, this means solving problems like ensuring access to drinking water in all parts of the city, organising civic protests against new development projects that could damage the quality of living in the existing settlements, and starting negotiations over public transport routes. Members of COCIDEP meet every second Wednesday in a small room in barrio San Diego, one of the oldest parts of Zona Sur, where Damaso himself lives. Sometimes the meetings were urgent and direct action needed to be planned (as was the case with potable water when I met Damaso), but sometimes it's just a friendly meeting of old friends and comrades.

Damaso was very excited about presenting me to Raymundo. He called him "a very bright young man" and sounded very excited about how he is "just the

right person for you to talk to". Raymundo and his sisters Jeanette and Karina together created the organisation La Voz de La Rockcultura, with the aim to organise demonstrations and provide space for alternative culture. Raymundo presented himself to me as a "Zapatista anarchopunk and anticapitalist, proud Tzeltal", and carefully asked me about my political background. We then started a really long discussion about the Zapatista movement, anarchism in Europe, anarchism in Mexico, and Raymundo's opinion about the hundreds of activists coming to San Cristóbal from Europe. In the course of this discussion, I asked him about his motivation for political activism: "They are occupying our space. Even you are. I don't blame you. I don't blame all the people who are here to help us, nor do I blame the tourists, they bring us money. But what used to be indigenous land is now a tourist attraction. Some parts are just sold as an attraction and some parts are forgotten. You should see the place where my mother was born. Two hours away from here, and it's the end of the earth. No job, no future there, people are starving and nobody cares! All they see in the Zapatistas is the revolution, according to your standards. I believe in revolution, but of a different sort. I believe that the revolution will give us back what is ours. I am a Zapatista and an anarchist, because I am going back to my own roots."

Raymundo's proclaimed "Zapatista punk-anarchism" is certainly based on his own "roots", as he calls them – on his Tzeltal origin and also of his working-class background (his mother is a cook, cleaner, and seamstress, who worked all her life in the households of the richer inhabitants of San Cristóbal and comes from the village of Yochip, a remote place high in the mountains about a three hours ride from the city. Her sisters still live there, in a wooden house with an open fireplace and very limited access to anything outside the community). It is, however, also strongly influenced by the global indigenous imaginary that the Zapatistas so skilfully spread through their media and online communication. I have analysed elsewhere (Heřmanová 2010, 2016, 2018) the individual and collective imaginaries that the visitors of San Cristóbal bring with themselves when they come to visit Chiapas – a blend of mystic, spiritual, "indigenous" culture, exotic, but still comprehensible, "manageable sort of Otherness that plays to our insidious preconceptions of primitives with potential – an understandable, manipulable sort of hybridity," as Edward Fischer notes (Fischer 2014: 154). The magical realism of Zapatista's communiqués (see below) and the – for the Western visitor – fascinating mix of political activism with "tradition" is nothing less than a skilful subversion of this hybridity into a political tool. Raymundo and his peers are aware of all the stereotypes of

"noble savages" still present in the Western discourse, but they internalise it and re-construct in ways that are purposeful to them. The following is just one of many examples of this process.

A few days later, Raymundo took me on a walk through Zona Norte together with his friend Paolo. I asked him if he could show me the place, because I was still disoriented there and I wanted to take a few pictures and record what he knows about the colonias. We met at the zocalo, which on the official map issued by the tourist office is called "Plaza central" or "Plaza 31 de Marzo". Raymundo however called it "Plaza de La Resistencia". As Damaso explained to me: "We have our own names, because these places have importance for us." We walked through the pedestrian zone full of souvenir shops to the public market. "This is the mercado, the real one", Raymundo pointed out to me. Usually, the "mercado" is located in the area around the Santo Domingo church, where hundreds of booths with clothes, bags, Zapatista t-shirts, and hand-crafted jewellery are sold. But according to Paolo and Raymundo, this is not the real Mercado. "The Mercado is not there, it's where the vegetables, shoes, and clothes for local people are sold. The things that local people need", Paolo explains. We walked past the marketplace, crossed the river, and entered the Zona Norte in the colonía 14 de Marzo. We walked for two more hours, bought cigarettes and water in a small grocery shop in colonía Progresso, and climbed up the hill up until San Antonio del Monte. A splendid view over the whole city opened itself below us. Raymundo started to point out important places – this is where my mother lives, this is where Paolo lives, there's the mercado, there's the Plaza de la Resistencia, there's the best pub in town…he never used the official names of the street, he never pointed out the famous churches or historical landmarks. He showed me "his" San Cristóbal.

Raymundo's map wasn't always in accordance with the official one (not only because some places existed on the first one and not on the second). For example "Plaza de la Resistencia" was guarded the whole day by the city police and social services, and the presence of indigenous vendors on it was the focus of the complex negotiations described above. But Raymundo was not much interested in negotiating, though he appreciated the efforts of his older compañeros and respected Damaso very highly. He did not want to negotiate – he simply claimed what was his by renaming it. His proclamations about "going back to the roots" (which were often used also in the speeches of his older compañeros from COSIDEP) were strongly connected to the discourse of the official Zapatista's communiqués and Marcos speeches. The subcommandante

uses a complicated, colourful language full of metaphors and stories, and Raymundo often quoted some of his phrases and collocations. The importance of language and the symbolic acts of reclaiming the urban space through it was also demonstrated by one particular event organised by the Zapatista movement. The EZLN[6] does not makes itself visible very often – in fact, it only presented itself on the streets of San Cristóbal on a very few occasions since the actual uprising on 1 January 1994. But in 2012, they made an exception. On the "magic" date of 21 December 2012, the date that according to many was a doomsday predicted by the old Mayan calendar, thousands of Zapatista soldiers appeared in the city centre of San Cristóbal. But what was most interesting about this particular event was the absence of any explanation – there were no speeches, there was no music, nothing. The masked guerilleros just walked through the city, in complete silence, with Subcommandante Marcos leading the silent march. A few hours later, an official communiqué of Marcos appeared at the Zapatista website, stating: *Did you listen? / It is the sound of your world crumbling. / It is the sound of our world resurging. / The day that was day, was night. / And night shall be the day that will be day.*[7]

"You see? This is also how you use the language to take back what is yours. By saying no words at all," Raymundo then wrote to me in a Facebook message. The Zapatistas in fact did say something, in the communiqué issued later that day, but said so in their usual symbolic, not really comprehensive way. This aspect was particularly important for Raymundo, Paolo, and their group – it is not important if anyone else understands it, we do. It is not important how you call this street, because we know its real name and therefore it is our street, our space. That was the message they wanted to send, as they explained to me.

While Juana María and the first generation of settlers used hard work, precious money, and the help of lawyers to be able to stay in the city, María and her peers, who came later, used organisation, negotiations, and peaceful and lawful protests to be able to stay. Raymundo and his friends, who were born in the city, used political activism, symbols, and language inspired by the

6 Ejercito Zapatista de la Liberación Nacional, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the military and also the most visible fraction of the Zapatista movement. While the EZLN still exists and is often associated with the movement as such, the Zapatistas are – for the moment – claiming to be non-military and a non-armed movement.

7 "*¿Escucharon? Es el sonido de su mundo derrubándose. Es el sonido de el nuestro resurgiendo. El día que fue el día, era la noche. Y noche será el día que será el día.*" Published on 21 December 2012 at http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/, translated from Spanish by the author.

Zapatista movement to make themselves visible and to claim their place in the urban infrastructure. Yet all of their stories are marked by the same struggle of living in the city that is their home and that also needs them as an important element in the local economy, but at the same time, whose officials and other inhabitants only very reluctantly acknowledge their presence in it and develop a complex system of restrictions and limits to their visibility in the urban space.

4. A Place that Does Not Exist on The Map – The City and The Non-City

The practical (in)visibility of the colonias and their inhabitants in the urban space can be illustrated by the difficulties of one seemingly very simple task – acquiring a map of the whole city. At the beginning of my fieldwork in San Cristóbal, in the early autumn days of 2008, I was trying to gather as much information as possible about the colonias and the people who live in them. I went to libraries, to bookshops, and to the municipality offices in the Palacio Municipal and asked for information: How many people live here? Could you give me a map? Do you know some organisations that work here? After almost a month, I was starting to feel quite hopeless – no one knew anything. I was not able to find one single organisation that worked in the suburbs. I was waiting for permission from the office of "Planeación y desarrollo urbano" (planning and city development) to obtain a map of the whole city of San Cristóbal, because on the maps available in bookshops and tourist offices, the city seemed to be much smaller than in physical reality. Zona Norte was not displayed on these maps. The streets ended with the public market in the north-west and with the highway circle in the south. After endless consultations, official stamps, and a letter from both my supervisor in Prague and my supervisor at Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM) in Mexico City, I was finally introduced to a lady in the office of urban development. She gave me a sheet that she called "memorandum" and gave me further instructions – I had to go to the bank, pay 170 pesos, then go to the cashier's desk at the city office. There they gave me an official stamp confirming that I had paid and with the confirmation, signed memorandum, and two recommendation letters from my supervisors, I was finally allowed to hand in my flash-disk and come the next day with the promise that they would give me the USB back with a map on it. It took me a whole month to accomplish such a seemingly simple task – to get a map of the city with all the streets and suburbs. And during this month, I asked myself

many times: How many people are willing to go through this process? Do these people in the shops and restaurants even know how big their city is? Or did I just imagine the colonias and they are not really there – because no one seems to know anything about them?

My informants also often spoke about the feeling of being "invisible." Belissario, a local leader from Zona Norte, told me during an evening festival at the zócalo that he felt invisible every time he went to the municipality offices. "They don't care about us there," he said. "Everything we have, we built ourselves – they sometimes promised to do something, but never fulfilled those promises. It's like we don't matter. We don't really exist." Juana María summed it up in one of our conversations, when she said, "How are you supposed to live in a city like this? Look at the map." She points to my documents on the table before us. "Look, Zona Norte is now bigger than the rest of the city. We work here, they depend on us, on our work – but they still pretend we don't belong here."

But it's not only when dealing with the city officials that indígenas from Zona Norte feel invisible. I once took María's younger daughter Cristina to go shopping with me – I needed some warmer clothes, as the winter was coming and I had hoped she could help me find something not too expensive. She took me to a few places and showed me some really cheap clothing stands at the public market. I asked her if this was where she went when she needed something and she shrugged. "Where else would we go? When I have some money, like during Christmas break when we sell a lot of stuff to the tourists, I would love to go to the shops at Real de Guadeloupe. But I can't. I tried once, but the lady told me to go away. Maybe she thought I didn't have money because I am indígena. But I had money. It's mostly that they just don't want to see us. We cannot go where the white people belong. They don't want to see us."

On another occasion, María said a very similar thing. We were sitting at the zócalo (the main square in front of the cathedral) in the evening. The vendedoras were only allowed to place their things on the ground after 8:00 p.m.; during the day, they had to walk with all their goods on their backs and make offers to the tourist in the pedestrian zones. After 8:00 p.m., however, the zócalo became a makeshift market full of indigenous women and their kids surrounded by blankets and sheets of plastic with colourful blouses, necklaces, and wool sweaters. I was helping María fold her blouses and sort out the tangled necklaces and we were talking about her negotiations with the municipality office. She was concerned about the prolongation of the permission for street

sale. María is a representative for a group of vendedoras and she was leading the negotiations at the time. When I asked her how it was going, she just shrugged and said, "You know, it's difficult. I know that they don't want us here." "But why?" I asked. "The tourists come here because of you. They would be disappointed if they came and there was no market during the night . . . It's good for the city, when it makes the tourist happy, isn't it?" I said, smiling. But María didn't smile. She just shook her head and said, "I know it's good. It pays, I told them many times. But even the money is not enough. They don't want to look at us. They think we don't belong here. They don't want to see us. They want us to remain invisible." As these examples show, the metaphor of "invisibility" was used frequently by the people from the colonías, and not only in reference to the non-existence of their homes on the map, but also in relation to how they (do not) interact with people from the city centre in their everyday life.

The British anthropologist, political theorist, and fantasy writer China Miéville very accurately captures this distinction between what is visible and what is invisible in his novel *The City & The City*, set in the fictive European city of Beszél and its "twin" city of Ul Qoma. Beszél and Ul Qoma occupy the same geographical space, but by the means of the "unseeing" practised by their denizens, they are *perceived* as two different cities. There are areas that are "total", which means they belong entirely to the home city of the resident, and then there are the "alter" areas, which are completely in the *other* city and also "crosshatched" areas – the most tricky ones, where residents of both cities may pass each other, walk along each other side by side – yet they cannot see each other, or buildings or things that belong to the other city, even if they are just inches away. Little children are taught to "unsee" the things, buildings, and people from the other city without actually seeing them. There is only one place in both Beszél and Ul Qoma where the border can be legally crossed. To ignore the separation, to see things that belong to the other side, is a crime worse than murder – and that is also the reason why movement in Beszél and Ul Qoma is so complicated for foreigners who are not trained in unseeing. They would mostly stay in their respective areas to avoid the breaching of the code – just like the foreigners in San Cristóbal, who never go further than the crosshatched area of public market. And what is also interesting is that places that exist in both cities have different names in each of the languages of the twin cities. They are and yet they are not the same place.

This dualism, so captivatingly explained in Miéville's novel, is also clear in the story about the encounter of Juana María with the lawyer who told her

that as far as he was concerned, her house did not exist (as quoted in one of the previous chapters). The people from the city cannot consider the suburbs as part of their urban space because in their perception, nothing would make Zona Norte “urban” – infrastructure, hierarchy, order, economy. They are also trained to unsee the houses and streets of Zona Norte, the ghost city that is – in their perception – not really there, because it’s not a *city*.

The interpretation of the non-existence of Zona Norte on the common maps of San Cristóbal as a sign of the symbolic “invisibility” of the space is thus the most obvious one, and it is also partly shared by the people who live there, as illustrated above. The implications of this idea are, however, complicated. Ann Varley (2013: 13) notes that the omission of informal settlements from the city maps is quite common, at least in the context of Latin America (Berenstein Jacques 2002, Brillembourg and Klumpner 2005, Gouverneur and Grauer 2008 – in Varley 2013, 13nn). According to Juáregui, slums, shantytowns, and “*cinturónes de miseria*” that “often go unrecorded in official cadastral maps, represent the negative image [la imagen *noire*] of society: what no one wishes to know about, non-places, intervals, ‘dead time’ in journey across the city” (Juaregui 2014 cited by Varley 2013: 30). Varley points out that Juáregui’s (and others’) concept of the settlements of urban poor (Brazilian favelas in his case) as “negatives” or “non-places” is based on an implicit dualism: it places “the city” and “the non-city” as opposites (2013: 11nn) and characterises them accordingly – as a space with proper urban infrastructure versus space that has no infrastructure; as an economically productive space vs. a space with no culture of production depending on black market and criminal strategies; or as an organised space with an embedded hierarchy and order vs. a chaotic, dangerous, lawless zone of a non-city. Besides the theoretical implications that are discussed below, this also practically leads to the confirmation of common stereotypes about marginalised areas, as Loïc Wacquant sums them up: “‘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 . . . hotbeds of violence, vice, and social dissolution” (2008: 1). Logically then, these places are invisible, because no one wants to see them – and the people in them are supposed to be invisible as long as they do not cross the border to the other city. And they might be prevented from doing so, because they could bring their disorder, chaos, and heterogeneity with them and disrupt the hierarchy of the official urban space.

The distinction between a city and a "non-city"[8] is also the basis for many interpretations of urban informality and urban marginality in recent academic literature. In the earlier years of the studies of urban marginality, dating back to the famous Oscar Lewis study *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (first published 1961) and the concept of the culture of poverty, there is always a strict dichotomy of informality and formality. In classical works such as Kenneth Clark's *The Dark Ghetto* or even Ulf Hannerz's *Soulside,* the formal serves as a reference group for the informal.[9] For example, there is the "white" city, as opposed to the dark ghetto. Varley quotes Rebecca Biron, who sums the widely held views of Mexico City (which Biron herself rejects): "The city embodies two dichotomous [. . .] worlds: on the one hand, a pre-modern, indigenous, informal, poverty-based squatter culture; and on the other hand, a hyper- or post-modern, multi-cultural, tele-connected, globalized, or world city" (Biron 2005 quoted in Varley 2013: 12).

In recent decades this approach has, however, been heavily criticised for two reasons: First, for being an embodiment of a post-colonial way of thinking, and second, because the reality of the so-called informal settlements has changed. The theoretical debate about the post-colonial dimension of the discussion and its critique from a mostly post-structuralist point of view, based on the observation that the way in which urban poor are depicted in scholarly works is very similar to the way in which the "noble savage" and "the Other" used to be depicted, is explained in Varley's study (2013). She mentions the concern with "negative alterity" that is created by such dualistic thinking. Non-places inhabited by urban poor are what jungles and deserts inhabited by noble savages were to previous generations of anthropologists and the exoticisation and simplification that follows from this thinking prevents the understanding of structural conditions of urban informality.

The physical changes in the social, political, and economical infrastructure of the ghettos, slums, and informal settlements were described by Janice Perlman in a revision of her groundbreaking study *The Myth of Marginality – Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (1976). Perlman visited her

[8] As a reference to Marc Augé's concept of non-lieux / non-places, developed in *Pour une anthropologie des mondes contemporains* (1994) and *Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (1992).

[9] Again, the distinction doesn't necessarily mean that the houses or settlements (i.e., physical infrastructure of the informal settlement) is built illegally – informally. Hannerz and Clark, and later Philippe Bourgois (1994), refer to the informal economy, not to informal settlements – which would be the case with Oscar Lewis. The distinction, however, remains the same.

field-site thirty years after her original research, and located many of her previous respondents to confront her findings with the reality three decades later. She recounts the changes in the environment of the city and notes that the traditional distinctions between favelas and the rest of the city "have become useless as denoters of how and where to draw the boundaries." The division in the urban space was still there, but it could not be marked in the standard ways anymore – by the "illegality" of favelas that have gained tenure in most cases or by the lack of urban services, since these have been provided to the favelas over the years. The shacks of shabby materials were replaced with concrete houses two or more stories high. In other words, favelas were, she noticed upon her return, no longer places distinguishable by extreme poverty visible at every step. "The only remaining distinction between favelas (often called *morros* or hills) and the rest of the city (commonly referred to as the *asfalto* or pavement) is the deeply rooted stigma that still adheres to them," Perlman notes (2005: 9).

Perlman's story of favelas in Rio is not significantly different from the story of the colonias in San Cristóbal or any other similar settlement in Latin America and elsewhere in the world. The first colonias and their growth are described by Betancourt (1997), who defines their character as "semi-urban" (s*emiurbano*). As previously discussed in the first section, the first colonias resembled the original villages of their inhabitants much more than they resembled urban settlement. There was enough space around the houses for cows, sheep, and chickens, and small cornfields were nestled in between the small wooden buildings. Some of the original colonias still partly keep this "rural" character, but the typical colonias like La Hormiga or Progreso, where María lives, are densely built up, they have concrete or gravel streets (in the street where María lives in Progreso, the concrete was built in 2010, though the colonia was established in the early 1990s). The semi-urban character is most visible in the newest colonias on the outskirts of Zona Norte, which I visited with María on the day we took her nephew José to school. The longer the colonia exists, the more infrastructure it usually has, and the less it resembles a village.

Just as in Perlman's case of Rio's favelas, the only way to distinguish between a well-developed middle-class settlement in Zona Sur – which is considered a good place to live for people who do not want to stay in the centre because of the tourist traffic, and that which is a typical colonia – is by the reaction of locals. Perlman notes that according to the data she collected, "among the multiple dimensions of social exclusion faced by the urban poor in Rio, the stigma of living in a favela is the most powerful, with 84 percent of respondents

claiming it as the most important factor" (2005: 12). Wacquant (2007, 2008) writes about the phenomenon of "territorial stigmatization," which explains the causality of the process of stigmatisation – it is not because you are a criminal that you go to live in a ghetto; it is because you are in a ghetto that you become a criminal. And as Wacquant points out, it does not really matter if you show any signs of a criminal behaviour according to the law, you will nevertheless *feel* and *be perceived* as a criminal, and "in these matters perception contributes powerfully to fabricating reality" (Wacquant 2008: 1).

The territorial stigmatisation attached to colonias can be observed in many everyday situations. When I decided to rent a room in Zona Norte, it turned out to be a task nearly as impossible as obtaining a map of the place – everyone I asked almost instantly became horrified and concerned about my safety. I did not really know where to start – the rooms there were not advertised online like the rooms in the city centre or anywhere else, and I did not know anyone who lived there. I had just begun to form a few relationships with some of the vendedoras whom I met everyday at the zócalo, but when I tried to ask them about a room for rent in their neighbourhood, they usually just started to laugh as if I had told them the best joke they had ever heard. I also asked my room-mates from the house in the city centre, because some of them had been in San Cristóbal for longer than I; Rudy, the jewellery artist from Ecuador, who sold his necklaces and bracelets from gemstones and amber at the market of Santo Domingo, had been living in San Cristóbal for almost a year already. He turned out to be the only one of my room-mates who even knew about the existence of the colonías in Zona Norte. When I asked Rudy about the colonías, I heard the story of La Hormiga for the first time – I was told the same story about dangerous drug addicts many times throughout the next few years, from friends, taxi drivers, bartenders, and once even a local activist. "La Hormiga is the most famous of all colonías," Rudy told me. "It's also the most dangerous one. I heard that there was a drug mafia – you see, the people there are not poor. They have money, but they have money from drugs – at least that's what they say. I wouldn't go there; you cannot go there alone. They don't like outsiders. They would rob you, at the very least. It's just not safe. We don't go into the colonías." Needless to say, he strongly disapproved of my plan to move into Zona Norte, told me that I was insane, and that he would not be responsible for someone possibly murdering me, because he had warned me.

The common discourse about the colonías thus only copied the official one and maintained the status quo – keeping the colonías and their inhabitants in

the strictly limited place, as invisible as possible. At the same time, the inhabitants of the colonías are very constantly and on a daily basis using and inventing various strategies how to remain visible.

Conclusion

As was already mentioned above, the story of the inhabitants of the Zona Norte is not rare in the context of Latin America, nor in the context of informal urban settlements all around the world. The aim of this text is to provide three concrete ethnographic examples of how urban marginality works on the everyday level, and what strategies are used by the people in the marginalised areas in order to find their space in the urban infrastructure. The final analysis of the metaphor of the "invisible city" then attempts the deconstruct the mechanisms behind these processes. There are three important points in the arguments above that can be applied in broader context.

First, the discourse about the urban poor tends to follow the direction of thinking about "the Other" and thus creates a strict dualism between what is a city – the home of "us," "the white people," or "the majority" – and what is the "slum," "favela," or "colonia" in my case, the home of "the Other." The colonia is thus depicted as a non-city, in a reference to Augé's non-places, a sort of negative image of the city itself that turns all the characteristics of the city upside-down. The division between the city and the non-city remains in place even after most of the physical denoters of such division are long gone, as for example Perlman's revision of her own research in Rio's favelas shows, or as it is also the case in San Cristóbal, where some of the colonias now in many ways resemble wealthier parts of the older colonial city centre. But even if parts of Zona Norte now look the same as parts of Zona Sur – they remain in the "non-city" zone. The strategies used by the denizens of the "non-cities" thus in many cases aim to overcome this dualism, as both Juana María's and María's story illustrate.

Secondly, the denizens of the non-city internalise the concept of the non-city, which is invisible to the people in the city. They feel and they are perceived to be invisible in the urban space of the city – Juana María's story about the negotiations with city hall is a most eloquent example of the perceived invisibility. The border between the city and non-city is strongly felt by inhabitants on both sides – in the case of San Cristóbal, it could easily be geographically located on the edge of the public market. It is both a physical and symbolic border that people who do not live in the Zona Norte seldom cross. The internalisation

manifests on the everyday level – in the practice of not visiting certain places or shops (as Cristina does), or in the subversive practice of renaming the places. Even though Raymundo's and Paolo's practice of "going back to the roots" aims at reclaiming the urban space, it nevertheless also starts from the perception of the divided city – what is ours and what is theirs.

Thirdly, as it follows from the two previous points, the internalised stigma of "invisibility" becomes the main denoter of what is a city and what is not a proper city anymore. The territorial stigmatisation that *a priori* ascribes certain characteristics of it (disorder, chaos, lawlessness, danger, and criminal behaviour) to Zona Norte and its inhabitants lays at the core of division of the urban space and forms a basis for the creation of urban marginality. Even though the visible marks are, in many cases, long-gone, the stigma stays, and the way it is internalised influences the strategies of coping with it.

The situation in San Cristóbal's colonias is not unique, and there are many other "invisible" cities, that are – at least in the Latin American context – very similar to Zona Norte. A significant body of literature thus exists exploring the inner organisation of the urban informal settlements, the family life and gender aspects, economy and crime, violence and health (Perlman 1976, 2005, Shepher-Hughes 1992, Goldstein 2003, Caldeira 2001). The focus on the specific duality of the "city" and the "non-city", illustrated here by three stories of three different generations, could, however, provide another perspective – one that focuses more on the relationship of informal settlements to the world outside of their streets, shacks, and households, and less on their inner workings. In San Cristóbal, the border of the urban space of the city centre and the semi-urban, informal non-place of the periphery is even more visible due to the intensive tourist gaze that the denizens of Zona Norte are subjected to. Their ways of dealing with it, making themselves visible and re-constructing and re-purposing the stigmas and the exoticising narratives ascribed to them could thus provide a rich ethnographic example of the agency of a marginalised people navigating their actions in a world of deeply embedded structural inequalities.

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