EDITOR'S PRE-FACE

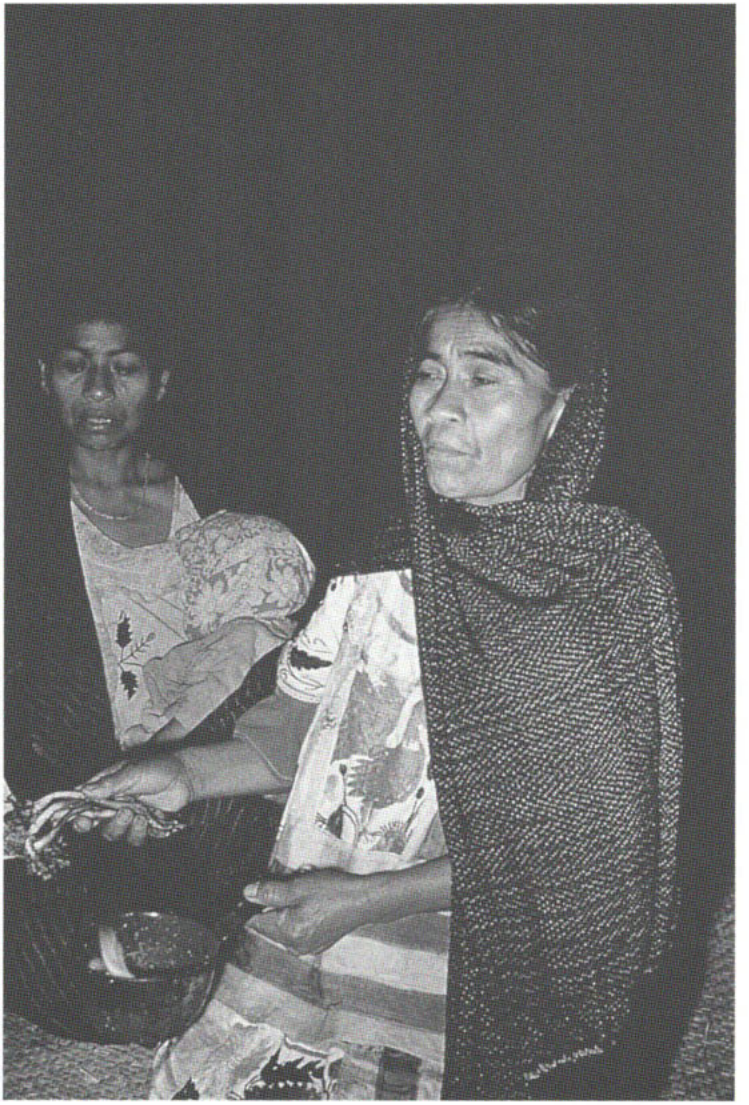
In Mazatec, María Sabina's calling was, literally, that of "wise woman" —a term that we may choose to translate as "shaman" or, by a further twist, as "poet." But that's to bring it and her into our own generalized kind of reckoning and naming. In much the same way, the book containing her oral autobiography, or *vida,* which first appeared in Spanish in 1977 and which makes up a large part of the present volume, translated her from the particularities of local Mazatec culture to the generalities of a book and media technology that can travel almost anywhere. (Or so we like to think.)

When I visited Mexico in the summer of 1979 to arrange for publication and translation of her *Vida* into English, the film *María Sabina: Mujer Espíritu,* a documentary by Nicolás Echevarría, was playing under government sponsorship at the large Cine Régis in downtown Mexico City. María Sabina herself had been brought to Mexico City the previous month—a small, elderly Indian woman, dressed in the traditional bird and flower huipil, and with only a touch of Spanish at her service—and had been much patronized (even lionized, I think the word is) before her return to her native Huautla, a small and remote hill town in the mountains of Oaxaca. (All this in contrast to the attempt, a dozen years before, to arrest her for practice of the sacred mushroom ceremonies that existed in the Mazatecan sierras long before the first conquerors set foot there.)

I hope, in calling attention to the degree of fame she has, that I don't frustrate the reader's enthusiasm for things Indian and remote. She was certainly aware of being famous ("the judge knows me, the government knows me," she sings), though by our standards it had little effect on her life per se. She continued to live in her old tin-roofed house—even while a new prefabricated home supplied by the government was going up nearby. She continued to walk barefoot up the hillside, to speak Mazatec, not Spanish, to cure and to shamanize, to smoke cigarettes and drink beer from the bottle, to celebrate her own life of labor and her ability to make a clean bed, along with those other powers, language foremost among them, that had won her local and international repute. A poet, in short, with a sense of both a real physical world and a world beyond what the mind may sense, or the mouth proclaim.

Before her name reached us clearly, her image and words had already come into our world. By the late 1950s, R. Gordon Wasson's recording, *The Mushroom Ceremony of the Mazatec Indians of Mexico,* was in circulation, and even before, *Life* magazine had run a feature (part of a "Great Adventures Series") on Wasson's "discovery of mushrooms that cause strange visions."[1] Soon thereafter one heard from travelers in Mexico of side trips to see and be illumined by the "mushroom woman" of Oaxaca. (Her own view of these matters awaits the reader, within.) And in the strange way in which ideas about language may travel in advance of the language itself, the Spanish Nobel poet Camilo José Cela constructed, early along, a highly fantastical opera about her, *María Sabina y el carro de heno, o el inventor de la guillotina*—a takeoff in part on what he took, from what was

1. May 13, 1957. The cover, which mentions the Wasson piece as one of its headlines, also shows a photo of comedian Bert Lahr ("as a bumbling lover") peering through tropical fronds—a curious example, so to speak, of cultural synchronism.



María Sabina incensing the mushrooms. *Photograph by Allan Richardson. Courtesy R. Gordon Wasson Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

then available, to be her style of languaging.[2] In Mexico she became the subject of at least one comic book and of other forms of popular diffusion, and the American poet Anne Waldman, having come across the liner notes to Wasson's *Ceremony,* circa 1970, used them to model a work called *Fast Speaking Woman* that she performed in poetry readings and even, if memory doesn't fail me, as part of Bob Dylan's short-lived Rolling Thunder Review or of his film *Renaldo and Clara:*

I'm a shouting woman
I'm a speech woman
I'm an atmosphere woman
I'm an airtight woman

in distinct reflection of the other's:

I am a spirit woman, says
I am a lord eagle woman, says

—which the North American poet acknowledges formally as her "indebtedness to the Mazatec Indian Shamaness in Mexico." Yet she fails at that point to name her—with a sense, one guesses, that the "shamaness" is of the anonymous tribal/oral sort. But María Sabina was already in "the world" by then—beyond the boundaries of her own place, to be given a measure of fame and the Western trappings of immortality-through-written-language that she herself could hardly have sought.

The confusion, as such, is easy enough to understand. María Sabina is Mazatec without question, and the mode of her chants (the way the

2. "I'm a woman who cries / I'm a woman who spits / I'm a woman who pisses / I'm a woman who gives milk no longer / I'm a woman who speaks / I'm a woman who shouts / I'm a woman who vomits / I'm an unrefined woman but I know how to fight against death and the grass that brought forth its venom" (C. J. Cela).

words go, etc.) is not merely personal but common to other Mazatec shamans. Among them she stands out—not alone but sharing a language with the other great ones, including those "tiger shamans" we hear of in the hills, who rarely make themselves visible in the town environs of Huautla.

This book, then, is centrally hers.

But it is as well a book of transmissions, of which Waldman's (like my own) is a curious and distant instance. The songs, the words, come to María Sabina through the agency of what Henry Munn has elsewhere called "the mushrooms of language." (Her qualification of each line with the word *tso,* "says," is a testimony to that: that it is not María Sabina but the unspoken he/she/it whose words these are.) Then, sometime past the middle of her life, R. Gordon Wasson begins the other transmission that carries her words over great distances: an offshoot of his studies of mushroom history and lore but one that continued to affect him for the rest of his life.

The transmission most crucial to this book is that between María Sabina and Álvaro Estrada. A Mazatec speaker and fellow townsman, Estrada engaged her in a series of recorded conversations, which he translated into Spanish and made the basis of her "oral autobiography." To this he added a new translation of Wasson's 1956 recording and a series of footnotes and commentaries, not as an outside observer but with a native feel for Mazatec particulars and with testimony from older members of his own family and from other Mazatecs, local shamans among them, still deeply involved in the native religion. He is in that sense no innocent Carlos Castaneda nor is María Sabina a shadowy Don Juan, but both stand open before us. The poetry and the vision are nonetheless intense.

On the basis of Estrada's work, I was able to arrange for the publication, in 1981, of *María Sabina: Her Life and Chants.* That book was

Álvaro Estrada and María Sabina. *Photo courtesy of Álvaro Estrada.*

part of an unrealized series of books, New Wilderness Poetics, that I had intended as a bringing together of ethnopoetic and experimental poetries under the imprint of Ross-Erikson Publishers in Santa Barbara, California. With the death of publisher Buzz Erikson and the suspension of the press, the book, while published, had only a very limited circulation.

In the Ross-Erikson version, the active translator and commentator was Henry Munn, who was also my own contact to María Sabina and the Mazatec ritual world. Continuing the process begun by Estrada, Munn added a second chanting session (the sole recorded one in which only Mazatecs were present), along with additional observations from both "inside" and "outside" points of view. Munn's connec-

tion was itself a part of the recent history of Huautla. His entry there, circa 1965, was as one of those "oddballs"—visitors to Huautla in the 1960s—cited by Wasson in an accompanying "retrospective essay"; but Munn was a genuine seeker as well, and after the "great bust of 1967," he returned to Huautla, married into the Estrada family, and has since become his own witness and a devoted student of Mazatec culture. An early essay of his, "The Mushrooms of Language," is a brilliant introduction to the verbal side of Mazatec shamanism: a first recognition of the shaman's work as an essentially poetic act and, in the Surrealist master André Breton's definition of *poesis* quoted therein, "a sacred action." Munn's translations (drawing on both Mazatec and Spanish) are equally attentive, and his commentaries there and elsewhere direct us to a range of mythopoetic connections (local and universal) informing the Mazatec chants.

The presence, alongside María Sabina, of Estrada, Munn, and Wasson made of this work a multileveled book of testimony—and something more: a book of exiles and losses. This will seem surprising only if one sentimentalizes or primitivizes the Mazatec present, for the present is perennially a time of loss and change. Viewed in this way, Estrada may appear as the acculturated Mazatec, whose adolescence coincided with the arrival in Huautla of anonymous hippies and world-famous superstars in search of God, and who early on withdrew to work in Mexico as a writer and engineer. However, Estrada's yearning here (as it came across to me in conversation with him) is for something that draws him backward, that fascinates and troubles him, and that he cannot possess; he honors it, but mostly he lives apart from it. With Munn, the stance—of exile and escape—seemed different from the start: a flight-from-time in search of mysteries/illuminations that brought him to the place left vacant by Estrada: the town, the family, and so on.

But overshadowing them both is the culturally authentic, strangely marginal figure of María Sabina, whose personal history (never "erased" in the Castanedan sense) is always precarious and whose spiritual universe begins to change (she tells us) with the coming of the blond strangers, a few at first, then in great waves in the 1960s. With a sense of what was at stake and of his own role in the subsequent engulfment of Mazatec culture, Wasson, accused, responded as poignant witness: "[Her] words make me wince. I, Gordon Wasson, am held responsible for the end of a religious practice in Mesoamerica that goes back far, for millennia. 'The little mushrooms won't work anymore. There is no helping it.' I fear she spoke the truth, exemplifying her *sabiduría.*" And, still more strikingly, the words of another shaman count the losses for Estrada: "What is terrible, listen, is that the divine mushroom no longer belongs to us. Its sacred language has been profaned. The language has been spoiled and it is indecipherable for us."

The word "language" hits here with tremendous force; for this is crucially a book of language, a reflection of the great Book of Language that María Sabina saw in her initiatory vision:

> On the Principal Ones' table a book appeared, an open book that went on growing until it was the size of a person. In its pages there were letters. It was a white book, so white it was resplendent.
>
> One of the Principal Ones spoke to me and said: "María Sabina, this is the Book of Wisdom. It is the Book of Language. Everything that is written in it is for you. The Book is yours, take it so that you can work." I exclaimed with emotion: "That is for me. I receive it."

And she did and was thereafter a woman of language—what we would dare to translate, by a comparison to those most deeply into it among us, as "poet."

Her own words and her highly tuned chants (the improvised and

collaged "sessions" that function like long, driving poems) make this clear. Wasson's account of her actual performance and its impact on the first enthralled outsiders brings the message home, as do the appraisals by poets (Homero Aridjis, Waldman) from outside her time and place. And hearing her voice on tape or reading her here in translation, we catch the presence of a great oral poet, one whom we can now see working and changing over the course of time—in three recorded sessions, 1956, 1958, and 1970. The Language revealed is awesome, not because it allows her to control the world around her (it doesn't) but because it lets her survive the sufferings of a world in which the spirit of Language itself has been "profaned," in which "it wanders without direction in the atmosphere ... not only the divine spirit ... but our own spirit, the spirit of the Mazatecs, as well."

A devastatingly human book and testimony, hers is an appropriate inclusion for a series on millennial poetics over a broad human range. This broadening and expansion was the motive for those of us who entered some years ago into the pursuit of an actual "ethnopoetics"—a term the poet David Antin expanded still further to mean "Human Poetics ... People's Poetics or the poetics of natural language." And other-than-human as well, if we take her word for it: "Language belongs to the saint children"—the sacred mushrooms—"They speak and I have the power to translate." Or Antin further: "What I take the 'poetics' part of ETHNOPOETICS to be is the structure of those linguistic acts of invention and discovery through which the mind explores the transformational power of language and discovers and invents the world and itself."

In that sense we aren't dealing with something merely alien/exotic, but we are all potential witnesses and transmitters, all suffering exiles and losses, all in an encounter with language and vision. María Sabina's Language bears the traces of such an encounter and presents

them in a form in no way incomplete: a language-centered poetics and a guide that encompasses even that writing which we would still speak of, in our arrogance, as the final instrument of language that separates her and us. But she has seen the book as well—the Book of Language—and that makes of her own work and Estrada's a Book about the Book. And, if we let it, it is also a book of healing: a language directed against that *sparagmos*—that classic split in consciousness—that tears us all asunder. The wounds are deep and probably irremediable, but the dream, while we're alive, is that of wholeness. Here is language as a medicine, its ancient function; for, as she puts it elsewhere, "with words we live and grow," and (again speaking of the mushrooms with a familiar Mazatec word) "I cured them with the Language of the *children.*"

ADDENDUM TO A PRE-FACE

The series of books for which this volume serves as a crucial anchor/pivot aims to present a range of poets whose work, taken *ensemble,* will give a sense of the changes that have affected our ideas of poetry over the preceding century and the beginnings of the present century and millennium. To bring María Sabina into such an ensemble is to question the boundaries of poetry as a matter of literature, at least in the way in which those words—"poetry" and "literature"—are commonly understood. That questioning, of course, is precisely the point of her inclusion here—an experiment in definition that attempts to see what happens when we place beside the experimental poets of our time one whom Henry Munn calls "a genius [who] emerges from the soil of the communal, religious-therapeutic folk poetry of a native Mexican campesino people." Or going a step further, it is an attempt to explore what the Mexican poet Homero Aridjis means when he

speaks of her, unequivocally, as "la más grande poeta visionaria de América Latina en el siglo XX" ("Lo indígena es bello," in *La Reforma,* March 18, 2001), or elsewhere as "one of the best poets, not only of Mexico but of the entire American continent." (See page 164.)

In constructing the present gathering, I have tried to avoid the impression that María Sabina is being presented here as herself a kind of experimentalist. (Henry Munn's new essay, below, makes her traditionalism, however different from our own, abundantly clear.) Nor is she a poet in her own terms but a Wise One and a healer—functions to which some poets of our own (and not the least among them) have aspired in a culture foreign to the values and assumptions of her religion and her shamanism. At the same time it's clear that she was a contemporary of ours in many fundamental ways—supported and abused by the same powers that have impinged on all our lives and works. So a balance has had to be struck between our differences and similarities, even while recognizing that most readers will come to the work with their own presuppositions and that little can be done as editor (also with presuppositions) to counteract them.

The principal intention of this book, then, is to present María Sabina as a poet—more precisely, to present her Language—both as structure and as vision—as a kind of poetry. It is a context in which she has rarely been presented or considered, except by a relatively small number of active contemporary poets. Her works, as written down by others, take up most of the pages that follow; they are the heart of the book, far more intrinsic than the commentaries about them. The first work and the key to all the others is her *Vida*—a construction by Álvaro Estrada based on a long series of disconnected interviews that he carried on with her in the Mazatec language. This leads in turn to a full translation—by Henry Munn and others—of the earliest of her recorded chants (her "poetry" as such), transcribed

by Wasson in 1956 and disseminated not long thereafter by Folkways Records. With Wasson's "mushroom velada"[3] recording of 1958 and the 1970 recording (attended only by fellow Mazatecs), this constitutes the body of her surviving work. And because the three chants vary and supplement each other in a number of ways, I have included not only the full Folkways chant but also excerpts from the other two (the "mushroom velada" one in a differently inflected translation by George M. and Florence H. Cowan) as a way of filling out—enriching—the work presented here.

As with the other books in the series, the rest is (largely) commentary—an effort in this case to provide a context for the *Vida* and the Chants, along with a sense of how María Sabina's words and life have affected poets over a wider human range. In a section designated as "Commentaries and Derivations," the opening voice is that of Álvaro Estrada, who provides an introduction both to her *Vida* and to his own seminal role in its composition. The three accounts that follow are from observers who have been close to her: the description by Wasson and his wife, Valentina Pavlovna Wasson, of an early performance session and of their responses to it; a detailed discussion by Henry Munn comparing María Sabina's chants to those of other Mazatec shamans; and Homero Aridjis's description of his interchange with her in the last years of her life.

Aridjis's short essay is the first of several excerpts from contemporary poets who have responded to her as a woman of language, whose work has a meaning outside of its place and moment of origin. At a still greater remove Anne Waldman is represented with both an excerpt from *Fast Speaking Woman* and an essay on how that work de-

3. The Spanish word *velada* ("vigil" or "soirée") was Wasson's choice as the general term for the the all-night shamanic sessions. It was also, he tells us, customarily used by Spanish-speaking Mazatecs.

veloped from a first sighting of María Sabina's chants and how the chants themselves fit into the framework (North American and Buddhist) of Waldman's poetry and world. My own poem, "The Little Saint of Huautla," is a meditation, more or less, on a 1979 meeting with María Sabina. And the final derivation is, by contrast, that of Juan Gregorio Regino, a younger Mazatec poet writing in the native language and with an awareness of his own relation to—and divergence from—the workings of the older Mazatec shaman-poets: the *chjinie,* as he names them in the work translated below, beginning with some lines by María Sabina. To the extent that poetry and language are communal activities—"made by all and not by one," as the Surrealists once had it—Regino's work brings the *lengua mazateca* that he shares with her into a dynamic, always changing present.

That much I think is understood by all those who have contributed to this book. For me the two key figures here were Munn, who was my personal guide, and Estrada, without whom María Sabina would have remained in the anonymous condition imposed on indigenous peoples by the external dominant cultures. If Estrada is the de facto author of this book, in a sense Munn is the de facto co-editor—a knowledgeable and passionate observer and participant, who for more than thirty years has worked on the intellectual and poetic dimensions of the Mazatec and Mesoamerican experience. I would be remiss not to call attention to his patient and persistent work, and if this book were to have a dedication, it would surely be to him.

Jerome Rothenberg, 1980/2003