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Undiscovering the Pueblo Mágico: Lessons from Huautla for the Psychedelic Renaissance



Ben Feinberg

Abstract The people of the Sierra Mazateca region of Mexico became internationally known in the 1950s for their ritual use of psilocybin mushrooms, and the Mazatec town of Huautla became a destination for mushroom seeking visitors. This chapter provides an overview of changing Mazatec and “outsider” discourses about mushrooms and the Sierra Mazateca over the last 60 years. It argues that “outsider” representations of the Sierra Mazateca and mushroom use—whether framed in terms of spiritual journeys or scientific research—tend to recapitulate some consistent patterns common to other forms of cultural tourism that owe more to the role of substances in marking distinctive cultural identities than to the effects of the substances themselves. It concludes by suggesting lessons from this history for the current moment, in which a discourse framing the use of psychedelic substances through universalizing narratives of science and individual health is becoming ascendant

Nothing signaled the triumphalist moment in the biomedical approach to psychedelics like the Psychedelic Science conference at the Marriott Hotel in Oakland in April 2017. *The New York Times* compared the event to the Coachella music festival taking place over the same weekend, only “rather than rock stars, scientists from schools like Johns Hopkins and N.Y.U. were the main attraction,” bringing evidence for the effectiveness of psychedelic substances—once exclusively the territory of the counterculture—to treat a broad range of maladies, from PTSD to depression (Schwartz, 2017). While scientists dominated the conference rooms, an anthropologist wandering through the exhibition hall could marvel at the eclectic, and at times contradictory, mix of pro-psychedelic discourses and cultural domains, united only by a shared optimism.

Here, a section of the room was devoted to poster presentations overflowing with charts and graphs and margins of errors demonstrating, for example, the

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“characterization of mystical experiences occasioned by 5-MeO-DMT containing toad bufotoxin” or the success rates of “3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) on conditional fear extinction.” There, a young man sold coloring books based on visions he experienced while taking ayahuasca. Here, a drug company, using a font and logo as alienating and disembodied as that of any other pharmaceutical product, marketed distinct cannabis-based treatments for pain relief, sleep disorders, and finding calm with the slogan “Targeted formulas. Precise dosages.” There, brochures used classic psychedelic imagery to advertise an online university as “The Ultimate Learning Hub for All-things Ayahuasca,” where you can “Go deep in powerful online courses taught by experts” and “learn how to maximize your ayahuasca journey.” I watched one of the most renowned of the celebrity scientists, psychologist James Fadiman, on a screen in the overflow room as he spoke from the Grand Ballroom, breathlessly listing the infinite benefits of regular microdosing with LSD: from reducing procrastination and increasing productivity for Silicon Valley coders to enabling better relationships for lovers to guaranteeing more intense workouts and performance for elite athletes.

One could interpret this dizzying spectacle of reputability through the narrative of the inevitable conquest of reason over superstition, a kind of twenty-first-century Scopes Trial heralding the reemergence of scientific progress after a 50-year-long dark age of ignorance and repression. Or one could view it through a darker lens, as an extreme manifestation of the kind of dystopian cooptation imagined by the Bay Area punk band Dead Kennedys in their song, *California Über Alles*: “I am Governor Jerry Brown, my aura smiles and never frowns. . . You will jog for the master race, and always wear the happy face” (Biafra & Greenway, 1979). But if one steps back from the splendor of this scientific renaissance in psychedelic studies, where (almost entirely) White scientists hawk the benefits of psychedelic substances in treating mostly White patients in front of an overwhelmingly White audience in a convention center in the heart of a great city, one must encounter the story of a Mexican town called Huautla de Jiménez. In Huautla, even as science retreated from its earlier enthusiastic engagement with psychedelic research, the centrality of a particular psychedelic organism—the hallucinogenic mushroom—never went away. What does the story of Huautla, a Mazatec-speaking community that improbably achieved international fame in the 1950s, have to say to the current moment of excitement about psychedelic medicines?

In this chapter, based on my research over the last 25 years in the Sierra Mazateca, my goal is to go beyond the stereotype of “magical” Huautla, “city of the magic mushrooms,” and provide an overview of Mazatec and “outsider” discourses about mushrooms and the Sierra Mazateca over the last 60 years. I highlight the ways that these representations are fluid and dynamic and involve forms of connection and misunderstanding within and between these two broad (and themselves heterogeneous) groupings. I argue that “outsider” representations of the Sierra Mazateca and mushroom use—whether framed in terms of spiritual journeys or scientific research—tend to recapitulate some consistent patterns common to other forms of cultural tourism that owe more to the role of substances in marking distinctive cultural identities than to the effects of the substances themselves. I will conclude by suggesting lessons from this history for the current moment, in which a discourse

framing the use of psychedelic substances through universalizing narratives of science and individual health is becoming ascendant.

Huautla: *Pueblo Mágico*

For outsiders, the history of the Sierra Mazateca area of Oaxaca began in 1955, when the American banker and mushroom enthusiast Gordon Wasson visited, participated in mushroom rituals, and then wrote about his experience for *Life* magazine (Wasson, 1957). Wasson had developed a theory that the different cultures of the world could be classified as mycophilic (like that of his Russian wife) or mycophobic (like his own New England Protestant family). After the American missionary Eunice Pike tipped him off that there were Indians in Mexico who consumed a mushroom that they considered sacred and which gave them visions, he realized that this could confirm his theory and determined to experience the mushroom for himself. He spent the remaining 30 years of his life researching and promoting psychedelic mushrooms and making frequent visits back to Huautla.

Wasson's article in *Life* led to a fungus rush, as foreigners descended on Huautla, led at first by avant-garde intellectuals who rented rooms in the town's only hotel, but followed by thousands of countercultural pilgrims who ultimately set up a large camp by a river a few miles outside of town. After tiring of the scandal and disruption they caused, in 1969 the town president asked the military to intervene. Sixty-four Mexican *jipis* were arrested, and 22 foreigners were deported (Zolov, 1999). For years thereafter, a military checkpoint on the only road into town blocked foreigners from access. In the mid-1970s, the army checkpoint was removed, and mushroom tourism resumed on a smaller scale.

Today, the image of Huautla is intimately connected with the image of the mushroom, which has become an official symbol of town identity. Visitors to the town pass a statue of María Sabina, the curer Wasson made famous, with her arms outstretched, and then drive under a great stone arch, in which the word *Bienvenido* (welcome) is flanked by carved mushrooms. Public space in Huautla is decorated with murals depicting María Sabina, and local businesses—from pizza restaurants to the ubiquitous taxis that navigate the city's network of impossibly narrow and steep roads—use the mushroom image for marketing. Even school parades, in which children wear costumes to demonstrate their town pride, emphasize the psychedelic substances as indexes of identity. In the parade I witnessed in 2014, kindergartners waved from a truck festooned with images of the hallucinogenic plant *Salvia divinorum*, known locally as *pastora*; the bed of the truck, besides carrying the children, overflowed with samples of the plant. Older children stopped and performed a staged reenactment of a typical mushroom ceremony, with a huipil-clad girl playing the role of the shaman, blessing children playing the roles of her patients.

In 2015, Huautla's application to be officially designated as a *Pueblo Mágico* (Magical Town) was approved by the Ministry of Tourism, providing the town with

an additional stream of revenue to be used to promote tourism. The Pueblo Mágico program aims “to revalue a set of populations in the country that have always been in the collective imagination of the nation as a whole and which represent fresh and different alternatives for national and foreign visitors” (Secretaría de Turismo, 2016, para. 1). While the program’s web page for Huautla lists a few natural attractions, the focus is on “spirituality” and the “cosmovision and legacy of the Priestess of the Mushrooms, María Sabina” (Secretaría de Turismo, 2016, para. 2). After years of official ambivalence toward Huautla’s reputation (preceded by a period of outright repression), this designation represented the government’s official embrace of Huautla’s mushroom-based commercial potential. Huautla was officially placed in the chronotope of the “magical”—a bounded place like Narnia or Oz, outside normal space and time and permeated by a permanent liminality and way of life and thought distinct from the everyday world.

Parts of the world that do not come to mind with great frequency except with regard to a particular trait or quality that has received broader recognition often become conflated with that trait, so that the people and the trait come to signify each other, and we imagine that the whole meaning or purpose of the people is to remind us, in case we have forgotten, of the importance of sensuality (for Micronesia, see Lutz & Collins, 1993), of the grand adventure of viewing big animals (for Africa, see Mathers & Hubbard, 2009), or of relaxation on deck chairs while swaying to reggae music (for anywhere on the “global beach,” see Lofgren, 2004). A visitor viewing Huautla through the lens of the “magical,” and seeing the mushroom images on walls and in parades, might be forgiven for assuming that Huautla means mushrooms and psychedelic spirituality, just as Cancún means sand, surf, and margaritas.

But the life of the people of the Sierra Mazateca is multifaceted, and if one lives there for any period, one realizes that the amount of time that most residents spend thinking and talking about hallucinogenic mushrooms is compared to time spent pondering questions such as work, migration, and navigating the intricacies of a complex and dangerous geography of kinship and social obligations, extraordinarily small, except for a very few. They are no more the “people of the mushrooms” than Texans are the “people of the chicken fried steaks.”

Here I must offer a disclaimer: I am not an expert on the pharmacological “effects” of ingesting substances such as psilocybin, though I have consumed them a number of times in Huautla and elsewhere; nor, really, am I an expert on the intricacies of Mazatec shamanism, though I draw heavily in this chapter from the pioneering and comprehensive work of Edward Abse (2007). But I argue that any attempt to understand the meaning of substance use that relies only an individualist and medicalizing focus on their therapeutic “effects” will miss the point in understanding the social meaning of substances and their circulation. Similarly, a detailed analysis of the ritual meaning of “the mushroom ceremony,” imagined as a private event meaningful only to the physically present participants, does not capture the broader role of mushrooms in reproducing social identities and groups. Pierre Bourdieu (1984, p. 2) wrote that, “To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers.” He could have added as a corollary that, to the socially recognized hierarchy of “drugs,” and

within each of them, corresponds a social hierarchy of consumers. Much of my time over the last 30 years in the Sierra Mazateca has been spent studying the construction of identity and the politics of representation. It became abundantly clear to me that the discourses of mushrooms and mushroom shamanism, like those about *all* drugs in *all* contemporary societies, are largely about differentiating, defining, and ranking different categories of people.

Is It the Same for Us and Them?

First, I would like to address a basic anthropological question: is “their” experience on mushrooms the same as “ours?” Can we make broad assumptions about the effects of substances across cultural borders between peoples with different ontologies and social structures? Whether our answer is a firm “yes” or “no,” with regard to the effects of mushrooms, there are implications that we should be aware of.

Individuals who consume psilocybin mushrooms may experience their effects as transcending the everyday barriers of language, culture, and the body and bringing them to a shared liminal space. As in Victor Turner’s (1977, p. 138) description of *communitas*, they may discover “a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person’s being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared.” Alexander Dawson (2015, p. 105) argues that both María Sabina and the psychiatrist Salvador Roquet experienced mushrooms “as actants, or vibrant matter that produced bodily effects independent of language and other meaning-making practices” and “since many of these effects took place outside language, they undermined the sense of difference produced by linguistic and cultural barriers.”

An answer of “yes” to the question of whether mushroom experience transcends difference allows us to see commonalities with others and recognized shared experiences but ignores the basic fact that, while substances may have common recognizable pharmacological effects on the human brain, these shared processes are interpreted in ways that are profoundly influenced and framed by culture, history, and social relationships. The assumption of similitude enables a leap of identification with others but also allows them, their social universe, and their interpretations to be ignored. By denying the possibility of the others with truly different experiences, it projects dominant metropolitan categories—such as the “individual self” and “spirituality”—onto them and elides the necessity of questioning Western cultural assumptions about what these mean. If indigenous experience of psychedelic substances does not offer anything genuinely different, then the role of indigenous people is reduced to their historical function as preservers of these practices until they can be “discovered” by more sophisticated people better able to understand and explain them. Local voices, such as shamans, are incorporated into the story only when they can be read (or modified) to corroborate Western biases; where they don’t, they can be ignored or dismissed as “superstitious” or “inauthentic.”

The goal of inquiry, then, becomes the documentation of a secret history of indigenous substance use rather than the interpretation of how substances acquire

meaning in particular settings. This parallels the approaches of second-wave feminist and early LGBT scholars who assumed that categories like “female” and “homosexual” were universally experienced in the same way. Recognizing that, in order to build a social movement, it was vital to have knowledge of a shared history, these scholar/activists read their own experience backward and constructed a “myth of silence, invisibility, and isolation” in which people just like them always existed but were hidden (D’Emilio, 1983, p. 101). The meanings of others’ experiences, in this framework, are already incorporated into the observer’s perspective and experiences.

But if the answer of “yes” ignores the possibility of fundamentally different cultural understandings, the alternative “no” answer, emphasizing difference, when taken to extremes, also leads to problematic and ahistorical representations of the other. As Roger Lancaster (1997, p. 195) writes with regard to the scholarship that examines sexuality cross-culturally, it often generates “excesses of absolutist relativism” that “abstract human existences into posed and frozen daguerreotypes, arrayed like exhibits in a vast museum that suspiciously resembles a mausoleum.” The “other” is seen as different, beyond any possibility of connection or dialogue, and also static and outside of history. From this perspective, people like the Mazatec may be seen as genuinely different, but only to the degree that they can be associated with labels such as “isolated,” “traditional,” and “ancient” that deny the reality that practices such as the use of mushrooms are dynamic and acquire meaning through constant interaction across cultural borders in evolving social structural contexts.

Popular understandings that individuals in different cultures experience drugs differently also have roots in the notion that people categorized in different races have different kinds of bodies. Spanish colonial drug laws banned non-Indians from using peyote because the drug, while appropriate for inherently irrational Indians, was believed to cause degeneracy for *gente de razón*, while the belief that cocaine drove Black people to rape White women justified mass incarceration in the United States (Dawson, 2018; Provine, 2007). In the 1990s, Jamaican folk beliefs categorized crack cocaine as a “White drug” for White bodies, while marijuana was a “Black drug” suitable for Black bodies (Broad & Feinberg, 1995). In each case, drug discourse functions to reify essentialized notions of biological difference in ways that tend to naturalize the effects of social inequality. Today, notions of essential “cultural” differences often replace biological explanations but serve the same function of mystifying exploitation while denying both the possibilities of connection across cultural borders and the diversity of experience within them.

In practice, many outsider representations of Mazatec mushroom pay lip service to the idea of cultural difference, but rarely examine their own perspectives as culturally specific, and generally ignore the ways in which cultural contact and difference are integral to Mazatec mushroom practice. The “cultural” (as a possession of indigenous people) is still bracketed out and recognized—but as something that affects “them,” and not us. Only rarely do accounts of nonindigenous use of mushrooms seriously consider their own cultural specificity.

When taken in their purer forms, both the “yes” and “no” options, then, fail to recognize indigenous experience on its own terms. Hence, an assumption of

universality erases others by locating them within the all-encompassing metropolitan self. Conversely, indigenous people like the Mazatec are often recognized as different but relegated to the space of the metropolitan other—as timeless, ahistorical objects of curiosity and charity and icons of authenticity, but not partners in dialogue.

Ceremony, Authority, and Travel: Changes in Mazatec Mushroom Shamanism

I will now briefly give an overview of some of elements of mushroom discourse in the Sierra Mazateca, highlighting how it has evolved, and some ways it contrasts with Western representations.

Abse (2007, p. 152) estimates that 1% of the people of the Sierra Mazateca are *Chjota chine*, or “people of knowledge” (referred to as *curanderos* in Spanish, although the use of the term *chaman* is increasing). These people typically serve a clientele that is based in their extended family groups. Curanderos provide mushrooms to their clients, and possibly other family members, during a ritual called a *velada*, or “stay awake,” that takes place indoors and at night. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, curanderos played important formal political roles in their communities: advising and serving as rulers, mediating between villages and kinship groups, and conducting community-wide rituals to deal with drought and in support of community projects. This formal role declined, but curanderos still often serve as informal leaders of their extended families.

While mushroom rituals may once have addressed community-wide concerns, today, most Mazatecos say that they should be taken to treat a particular health problem. These health problems may be psychological, such as *susto* (a condition caused by a sudden fright that forces the soul to leave the body) or postpartum depression, but they may also be conditions that foreigners consider biological, such as an injury or back pain. They may also be taken for other reasons, and Mazatec ritual practice has a strong streak of experimentation and very little dogma. In some lowland regions of the Sierra Mazateca, curers will use *Salvia divinorum* (*pastora*) as well as mushrooms, but Huautecons consider *pastora* a poor substitute for the real thing. People in the sierra view *Salvia* as similar to mushrooms, although the two substances are differentiated through the hot/cold Mesoamerican classification system: one woman told me that she does not like to use *salvia* as it is “cold,” while mushrooms are “hot.”

While Western visitors often emphasize visual and nonlinguistic experience, Mazatec shamanic practice highlights the importance of the curer as a speaker who uses a special charged and figurative form of language. Curers like Maria Sabina end each line with *tso*, or “says,” highlighting how they convey speech coming directly from the “child saints” (a term often used for mushrooms) (Munn, 1973). Language, in Mazatec ceremonies, is the most important element of healing

and often takes on material qualities; it evokes a purifying rain as participants may experience words, as Abse (2007, p. 171) writes, as “luminous objects or invisible textures coming down to them from the saints and Virgins.”

The special language of the shaman seeks out and identifies the cause of the patient’s malady, which is often couched in accordance with Mesoamerican container/contained models of the body and multiple souls. The curer may identify and remove intrusive substances by sucking or inducing vomiting or discover that a patient’s soul has been lost in the wilds of the *monte* (uncultivated forest) or in a place of confinement. The idea that people may “become lost” is central to Mazatec discourse beyond shamanism, and I have heard many stories of individuals who vanished into hidden caves in the monte, only to reemerge with no recollection of how they got there but with fantastic stories of underground cities and magical wealth.

Like Westerners, Mazatecs speak of mushrooms as a vehicle of travel: they describe “trips” and say that the substances “take you far away.” Shamanic language enacts and invokes travel, particularly between their home and spaces of power like oceans and cities. Like caves, mushrooms open up a pathway in which intermediaries, like the Mayan Hero Twins in the *Popol Vuh* (a pre-Hispanic book of Mayan myths), can enter spaces of symbolic and real power and intervene on behalf of their patients (Tedlock, 1985). The Hero Twins descended into the underground world to enter into a contest with powerful others—the Lords of Death—before returning to benefit their people, and Mazatec mythology is full of figures, like the light-skinned Mazatec Earth Lord named Chikon Tokoxho, who also personifies borders and transactions. A curer recorded by Henry Munn (1973, p. 106) in the 1970s used language to travel to Córdoba and Orizaba, the cities where *campesinos* would sell their coffee. He invoked the relevant symbols of power in his chants: “Where the Big Bank is, says. Where there is money of gold, says.”

While outsiders refer to the Sierra Mazateca through the tropes of “isolation” and the maintenance of an ancient tradition, mushroom discourse, at its core, has always been one of cross-cultural exchange and mediation, focusing on crossing the magically charged borders of day and night, the sacred and profane, and us and them.

Wasson, in his prologue to María Sabina’s autobiography, tried paternalistically to defend her against the charge that she was “illiterate” by comparing her to ancient oral poets, because she lived in a completely enclosed world: a fossilized, “protohistorical” version of our own Euro-American past, unlike the undeserving poor of our modern world who “lack the wit to learn to read and write” (Wasson, 1981, p. 15). This totally misses the point. María Sabina’s shamanism did not represent an idealized distinct culture on the cusp of its inevitable degradation but told the story of a continually reproduced marginality within a transforming system of exploitation. And books, far from being foreign to this world, play a central role as symbols of power and domination that curers like María Sabina could access. In her ceremonies, this illiterate woman accessed and read a magical book as a symbol of her appropriation of a form of power she was very aware of. Most Mazatec curers, whether they can read or not, take possession of magical books through which they connect to sources of power (Feinberg, 1997, 2003).

The way Mazatec people view ritual has changed over the last 50 years (as it likely had in the 50 years before that), though this change should not be viewed, as a narcissistic tourist model would have it, simply an “effect” of visitors. Neither can we accurately describe this change as a “degradation” of tradition through loss of “isolation” and the presence of media and foreigners.

The main change probably involves a shift in attribution in the cause of the patient’s suffering. While, for a previous generation, the victim’s misfortune was usually caused by an accidental transgression of a sacred space, such as by crossing a stream connected to particular sprites at noon, today the cause is more sinister. Shamans more typically identify the problem as the conscious, malevolent action of a person in the community. This relates to a particularly resonant Mazatec word, *kjoaxintokon*, that signifies “a hideous malevolence often concealed behind the mask of friendship”—an amplified version of envy (Abse, 2007, p. 31). Fortunato, a *campesino* in a lowland village, told me that mushrooms were “good for seeing who is trying to harm you.” Abse argues that this shift reflects the loss of trust following the transformation of community through the penetration of a capitalist cash economy and political parties. Mazatec curing, then, does not separate individual from social health; the two are always intertwined. Cures may require a patient to take certain actions, including, in some cases, the repeated ingestion of the substance every few days for a period of time.

The second main change is the decline of the authority of the curandero. In the mid-twentieth century, the curandero would take a large quantity of mushrooms, while the clients had smaller amounts, or sometimes none at all. The experience, language, and authority of the curandero, which corresponded to his or her social position within the community, were central. Today, individuals are more inclined to take mushrooms without a shaman and to usurp the shaman’s authority to interpret their experiences. Juana, for example, took mushrooms alone every few nights, about five or six times, until her leg was healed from a nasty injury. And Julia, who had never taken mushrooms before, decided to take them by herself after her husband abandoned her. She discovered, through this unconventional episode, that she possessed a previously unrecognized shamanic power to see the true nature of her situation and realized that the envy of her husband’s sisters had made him crazy. Through the ritual, she resolved the problem, and he returned shortly afterward to take his normal seat at the table, and she went on to regularly lead her family in mushroom ceremonies. My Mazatec informants frequently state that it is appropriate to “experiment” with mushrooms. “There are some problems that medicine doesn’t cure,” says Braulio, “and mushrooms may cure them. You experiment with them” to see if they can.

Mazatec mushroom practice and ideas about mushrooms are not static and have modified and adapted to changing circumstances. A famous quote from María Sabina attributes a general decline in the mushroom’s power to the arrival of mushroom-seeking foreigners after Wasson. “From the moment the foreigners arrived to search for God,” she told Alvaro Estrada (1981, p. 90), “the saint children lost their purity. They lost their force; the foreigners spoiled them.” But, despite this claim, many of the historical changes in Mazatec curing, including the shift in

attribution for sickness and the decline of the curandero's authority, are responding to other changes and should not be seen only as a "decline" caused by foreign "contamination." However, as I will discuss later, some curers have developed a non-Mazatec clientele, and this has led them to make more innovations in their practices.

Outsider Representations of Mazatec Culture and Curing

I will now discuss the key themes of outsiders' representations of Mazatec mushroom practice, which are similar to themes that anthropologists have identified in other sites of so-called spiritual tourism (Gomez-Barris, 2012).

The first is the overwhelming, repeated-to-oblivion claim that the people of the Sierra Mazateca represent the preserved past. From Wasson's description of María Sabina as a fossilized survivor of a lost world to the present, visitors describe Mazatecs as creatures of another time. In a recent television program on the Viceland Network, the young American protagonist Hamilton Morris (2016) could not help but frame his journey to Huautla in the same terms and to locate Mazatec ritual through the past tense. Morris first interviewed a scientist who had studied *salvia* in the Sierra Mazateca in the 1970s. The scientist explained "why the Mazatecs used this," and Morris added that "indigenous groups preserved religious traditions." He then journeyed to Huautla, falsely described as a "small" and "secluded mountain town," because "I hope to learn if the tradition he observed has remained the same." He consistently describes the Mazatec through the rhetoric of discovery, and the episode is framed as a rite of passage: a journey that begins and ends in a hypermodern, urban world, marked with the signifiers of scientific and avant-garde authority, and passes through a world of Mazatec shamanism framed as part of the past, whose function is to inscribe the first-world host with authenticity. The rhetoric of discovery reduces Mazatec history to the single dimension of continuity/change and produces a framework in which all change is interpreted as loss or contamination of an original purity.

These tales of the Mushroom People fix Mazatecs in a limited role as passive bearers of an unchanging tradition. Now that their historical function has been met, it's time to "pass on the torch" to the more "enlightened and sophisticated" foreigners who "discovered" them. María Sabina joined other commodified icons of "Latin American culture"—as a t-shirt next to Che Guevara and Frida Kahlo—or of "indigenous wisdom" that function as a source of inspiration for high culture. Like La Malinche of Mexican nationalist myth, the lover and translator of Hernán Cortés who revealed indigenous secrets, she is seen as passing ancient wisdom on to the bearers of the future. Once "discovered," the Mazatecs lose any right to agency. As the immensely popular Mexican rock band El Tri sang in their song dedicated to her, she functions only as a "symbol of wisdom and love": generic Western projections of spirituality (Lora, 1989). The song details how she "taught secrets" to journalists, philosophers, and poets, and "opened the eyes of the whole universe," achieving

worldwide fame. Her role is to “show us the path” and then die—and it is clear who gets to be included in “us.”

The representation of curers as women is a second theme. Visitors to Huautla who take mushrooms there usually do so with female curers, even though some 60% of Mazatec *chjota chine* are men (Abse, 2007, p. 152). Throughout Latin America, tourist discourses identify Indian women with the comforting, non-threatening aspects of the other, and as bearers of conservative cultural traits such as clothing and language. Indian women, unlike Black women, are desexualized (Weismantel, 2001, p. xl). The association of femininity with a form of indigeneity valued by tourists as the “principal signifiers of traditional culture, the indigenous, and the ‘Other’” opens possibilities for indigenous women in the tourist economy to strategically turn these stereotypes into economic capital (Babb, 2012, p. 38). Visitors to Huautla highlight these gender differences by ignoring men or by describing them as sinister and suspicious while viewing women as more appropriate points of entry into an authentic cultural experience.

A third theme is the lack of interest in culture, history, or language beyond its role as an authenticating backdrop. Very few of the mushroom-seeking visitors to Huautla I have talked to (with some significant exceptions), including many who have participated in mushroom ceremonies, express much curiosity about Mazatec interpretations of healing, or the social and political landscape of the region. As in other forms of adventure travel, “there is minimal attempt to get to know strangers, to risk one’s emotional and mental comfort zones and disturb any preconceived ideas” (Mathers & Hubbard, 2009, p. 202). The countercultural visitors of the 1960s whom I interviewed emphasized their own future-oriented utopian community, which was connected to other spaces of a globe-trotting drug culture. Huautla was the “poor man’s Nepal,” not a region in Oaxaca (Feinberg, 2009; Zolov, 1999). As in other locations of spiritual tourism, an “individualized spiritual journey replaces any broader social and cultural understanding of the local situation” beyond the “incorporation of native people as symbols of authentic purity” (Gomez-Barris, 2012, p. 73).

While most Mazatec healers who have attracted a small foreign clientele have remained poor and unable to transcend the unequal nature of this exchange, a few entrepreneurs have been able to position themselves as cultural mediators in ways that are very lucrative. One, in particular, has benefited greatly by the way that outsider discourse leads to uncritical celebration of a few culture brokers seen through a stereotypical lens. Julieta Casimiro is the most famous and wealthy living Mazatec curer. In an interview conducted by her daughter, Doña Julieta explained how her *chjota chine* mother-in-law taught her about mushrooms, commenting, “The truth is, I liked it” (Pineda Casimiro, 2007). In 1968, the hippie wave was cresting in Huautla. “At that time no one liked foreigners,” she said, “whether from other countries or other parts of Mexico.” Julieta was one of the first to sense the opportunity they provided while recognizing the risk. At first, she had to cultivate foreign clients in secret, “because it was frowned on to give *niños santos* to foreigners. That is, we worked against our culture and ran the risk that comes with opening your doors to those who don’t belong to your culture.” By 1993, when I



“ *Our Mother Earth is hurting. They are destroying our Mother Earth. They are destroying our Mother. They need to have respect for Her.*

– Grandmother Julieta Casimiro

Julieta is a Mazatec elder, from Huautla de Jimenez, and carries the tradition of healing and ceremonies with the use of sacred plants, the pre-hispanic Teonanactl, “Ninos Santos” way. She organizes the women of her village who create the most beautiful hand sewn clothing.

Fig. 2.1 Julieta Casimiro’s Bio from Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers website

lived in Huautla, Julieta employed a network of children and outsider hangers-on who actively recruited clients as they arrived in town, and in 2000, she was invited to an international conference in Switzerland. In 2003, she became a member of the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, a group of First Peoples women who periodically meet in different locations.

The bio for Julieta on the Thirteen Grandmothers (2017) website demonstrates the way her image circulates globally (Fig. 2.1). She is totally removed from her local social, cultural, and political context through generic imagery of commodified indigeness and generic “native wisdom” about protecting the environment; an always already hybridized curing tradition is described as “ancient” and “pre-Hispanic”; cosmopolitan Huautla is misrepresented as a “village”; and Julieta’s economic activities are mystified as a benevolent organization of “village women.”

In fact, Julieta and her family are powerful figures in a complex local and regional politics, closely tied to the PRI, the formerly dominant political party. In 2004, her son, known as El Diablo, was photographed beating a retired teacher to death because he was involved in a political protest against the gubernatorial candidate (Agencia Reforma, 2013). El Diablo was never arrested and is still politically active, and a frequent presence in Julieta’s household, along with her cosmopolitan clients. She has been able to creatively translate each of the themes of outsider discourse—mushroom use as the preserved past, the curer as female, and the lack of interest in actual Mazatec life—into a long and successful career.

Visitors' Mushroom Experiences in Huautla

In most cases, visitors describe their experiences with mushrooms as very positive and often express warm and grateful feelings toward their Mazatec interlocutors. While their accounts overlap with those of my Mazatec informants, their stories stress different themes, and some curers have adapted their practices to accommodate these concerns.

One theme is a certain ambivalence about the trappings of ritual and a re-inscription of difference between the individualist Westerner and ritualist Indians. A Dutch traveler emailed me that he participated in a mushroom ritual in Huautla “but was largely bemused by the experience,” concluding “that my white skin and Western mind would forever deny me experiences of the ‘archaic’ kind.” Then, he ate more mushrooms, alone in the city. “There was no ritual,” he wrote, “no observation of purity rites, no healer present. I took them for ‘fun’ and nothing else. To my astonishment, I had what I can only call a profound ‘spiritual experience’. . . . I remain unconvinced either way, suspended in disbelief, agnostic if you will.”

This story of a profound experience that results, ultimately, from the individualist triumph of the visitor is fairly frequent and emphasizes the contrast between the “self-oriented search for meaning” that characterizes contemporary Western spirituality and the emphasis on collective subjectivity and the social in Mazatec healing (Gomez-Barris, 2012, p. 73). These narratives depict the local intermediary as someone confined in a bounded culture limited by the trappings of ritual and convention. While the curer provides access to native culture as an object of consumption, the spiritual experience comes precisely from the visitor’s ability to transcend the particularities of culture.

Some Mazatec curers have embraced a customer service model in response to the preferences of mushroom tourists. Inés Cortés has been participating in veladas with foreigners since she was a young girl, though she had learned some chants and songs from her curandero uncle. But in describing her birth as a curer, it is not her uncle that she emphasizes but the psychologist Salvador Roquet, who she met hanging out at the Posada Rosaura, then the only hotel in Huautla and a setting of intercultural exchange that she remembers with profound nostalgia. Roquet invited her to the veladas he organized with large groups of his urban clients and had her clean the mushrooms and sing. She was enthralled and began hosting ceremonies herself as a young mother in the late 1980s. Her emphasis on the intercultural essence of curing is not “inauthentic” but is itself a version of the Mazatec link between shamanism and intercultural relationships and borders (Feinberg, 2003).

When I met Inés, in 1993, she would require that her clients obey various rules, such as fasting, wearing light colors, removing watches, and staying in the dirt-floored, cave-like altar room of her house where she would sing and chant to them throughout the night. Today, her practice has changed. She has embraced a more individualistic and customer service model. Shamans, she argues, can’t really see their clients’ issues or cure them; only the client can do that. She also has dropped the rules—“why tell them to do something,” she asks me, “that makes them

uncomfortable?” She has used her experience to develop a series of national stereotypes about her customers, many of whom are Japanese, as she was highlighted in a Japanese travel blog. “My *japonesitos*,” she says, “don’t like being in the altar room, and don’t like it when I sing. They would rather be in the corridor and left alone.” This shows another distinction: while the auditory experience of the shaman’s voice is a key element in Mazatec shamanism, foreigners comment more on visual and inner experience, rarely commenting on the language of the curer. In January of 2017, I observed two separate Japanese visitors she hosted and, in fact, both asked to be left alone on the roof of her house, where they took photographs of the town and selfies to share with friends.

Inés’s story demonstrates the possibility of intercultural dialogue and connection but also the asymmetrical nature of contemporary tourist encounters. In a context of inequality and competition for a dwindling tourist market, practitioners like Inés are led, whether intentionally or not, to voluntarily relinquish signs of their authority and redefine themselves as hosts of a bed and breakfast-like service experience.

Observations and Implications: From Huautla to Oakland

I met a scientific researcher in Huautla for the first time in 1994. He had conducted experiments with mushrooms with volunteer subjects in Europe in laboratory conditions but had come all the way to Mexico to try them for himself for the first time. I spoke with him over coffee in Inés’s kitchen, as he purchased a bag of the child saints, and then the next day, after he had consumed them alone in his hotel room, I asked why he chose to do that: why he had come so far to have his experience by himself instead of seeking a local intermediary. He replied that he wanted to be “in this place” but felt that he had nothing to gain from talking to anyone (he couldn’t speak Spanish anyway)—that he wanted to experience everything “in my own brain.” His story shows how the scientific discourse about psychedelics is itself a complex and contradictory space. While research has brought undeniable enhancements to scientific knowledge, it also cannot help but continue to traffic in the same powerful patterns of representing indigenous cultures used by spiritual tourists. In this case, the researcher, like other visitors to Huautla before him, sought to claim the sign of indigenouness as a marker of authenticity while insisting on the authority of Western models of individualized experience and transcendence that reject any possibility of mutual exchange.

The current renaissance in the scientific understanding of psychedelic substances is an opportunity to break with the false image of Mazatecos as belonging only to the past and recognize the value of Mazatec knowledge. But we should not underestimate the enduring power of these representations and remain alert to the ways that they permeate dominant representations, including those linked to scientific research. We often still see a contrast between local experiences bound within a static context and Western experiences represented as universal discoveries about medicine.

My ethnographic observations from the Psychedelic Science conference in April 2017 demonstrate these continuities. I approached this field site as a naïve outsider, and I cannot claim any sort of deep knowledge of my host community and its history, and my observations—puzzling over abstracts and wandering through hallways and exhibition halls—must be taken as tentative and speculative, for now.

The multiple and contested meanings at the conference can be looked at through the scholarly presentations, the audience reception, and commercial elements such as those on display in the exhibition hall. The academic portion of the conference was divided into three tracks: Clinical Research, Interdisciplinary Research, and Plant Medicine. The Plant Medicine track operated as a sort of counter-discourse to the more visible frameworks of biomedicine and spiritual tourism, as it included the voices and perspectives of a much more diverse and international array of presenters, including many more women (unlike the male-dominated clinical and interdisciplinary tracks) and some representatives of First Peoples. The diverse presentations in this track offered numerous challenges to the conventional wisdom. In this section, however, I am going to focus only on those elements of the conference that relate most closely to the cultural politics I have described in this chapter.

While some of the abstracts for the Plant Medicine track located psychedelic practices within distinct cultural contexts, others did not, focusing instead on the universal effects of a plant after an initial legitimizing and ahistorical reference to an indigenous group that used the substance “for thousands of years.” In fact, the representation of psychedelic practices as “plant medicine” has the potential to erase people from the equation. While Mazatec curers could tell you, if in different ways at different times, that the ceremonial ingestion of the “child saints” is medicinal, they would be invoking a view of curing that goes beyond the fungus and the individual brain and body but involves, at a fundamental level, other people; and the idea of “medicine” often implies, like the “spiritual” narratives of earlier Western visitors to Huautla, a purely individual experience that can be isolated from its social context, bracketing out issues like social inequality and marginalization.

Outside the Plant Medicine track, the absence of an awareness of human diversity was starker: only 1 of the 58 abstracts in the Clinical and Interdisciplinary tracks (a presentation on psilocybin research on religious leaders) located psychedelic experience within the context of a particular cultural setting. Instead, where people were mentioned, they were described in pan-cultural universals—as “individuals,” “people,” or “patients”—or else as carriers of a particular defined psychological condition (addiction, depression, PTSD, etc.).¹ While there is a great deal of evidence that culture influences how people think about and experience mental illness, through the different ways that “they categorize and prioritize the symptoms, attempt to heal them, and set expectations for their course and outcome,” the research presentations assumed the universality of Western labels, and thus the universality of the psychedelic treatments (Watters, 2010, location 50).

¹Williams and Leins (2016) point out that people of color have been significantly underrepresented as subjects for research on the therapeutic effects of psychoactive drugs.

While these research presentations excluded non-Western experiences, conference participants constructed indigenous people in various ways that sought to provide them with legitimacy. After my presentation about the Sierra Mazateca, an audience member asked me if I could confirm a story that a psychedelic researcher had provided María Sabina with synthetic psilocybin and that she had reported that it was “the same” as mushrooms. This story, which was told by Albert Hoffman (1980) about his visit to Huautla in 1962, was new to me, as it would have been of little interest to most Huautecons but apparently functioned as an important authenticating myth for some psychedelic researchers in the tradition of the myths of Pocahontas and La Malinche, in which indigenous women provide legitimacy for future generations of non-Indians to occupy their territory.

Indigenous people also provide legitimacy for some members of the White psychedelic community through their traditional role as undifferentiated objects of charity. After my presentation, an audience member asked me if she could interview me for a presentation she was making. Her only question was “how can we help the ‘tribe’ you were talking about?” In the exhibition hall, the booth of a business that offered ayahuasca retreats in the Peruvian rainforest (“ancient wisdom for the modern world”) included a poster promoting the way it provides outreach and jobs for local Indians. When I asked what this consisted of, the staffer told me that they “educate local people” and employ 23 locals who clean, cook, and carry supplies. Promotional materials for this program described local residents as “gentle” and “caring” and “embodying the wisdom and sincerity of their people.” Local culture is presented here as ancient, undifferentiated, and feminized. It embodies characteristics that perfectly suit a service economy; Indians are passive and grateful recipients of help, who contribute to the healing experiences of spiritual tourists without challenging their individualizing interpretations of what constitutes curing.

A final way in which White participants can use indigenous people to generate authenticity is, ironically, through rejecting their “White privilege.” I do not have space here to give justice to the politics of cultural appropriation, except to observe that these are complex and may be adapted to different types of representations. After two different Plant Medicine sessions dealing with peyote, the same young White woman came to the microphone to publicly announce that she had made the personal decision never to use peyote, as the value of this substance as the property of indigenous cultures was more important than her bucket list of drug experiences. At both sessions, audiences responded to this confession with a round of applause, a ritual that affirmed their righteousness as culturally sensitive allies of the Lakota and Huichol. While this would appear to be a rejection of racist appropriation, I would argue that it remains within the patterns I have described, bracketing off indigenous people as “other” through an effortless gesture that reinforces the universalized individualistic experience of the Western self, and reduces political and cultural complexity and exploitation to acts of individual consumer choice. Significantly, repudiations of White privilege occurred at presentations dealing with indigenous practices; rather than research presentations that treated psychedelic users through universalized liberal categories of “people” and “individuals.”

Ethan Watters (2010, location 3537) writes, “The ideas we export to other cultures often have at their heart a particularly American brand of hyperintrospection and hyperindividualism. . . [that has] encouraged us to separate the health of the individual from the health of the group.” But it is the insights about the essentially social nature of health and disease that I find most alluring in Mazatec mushroom curing, and that can be obscured by sciencifying narratives about the “effects” that psilocybin has on (Western) individuals. The history of Huautla provides lessons for current psychedelic researchers. We can learn from indigenous people, but only if we recognize that treating them as iconic reminders of an ancient past is no more helpful than ignoring them and pretending that the world is composed of individualized patients. Both of these approaches prevent us from embracing a kind of “cultural humility” (Sevelius, 2017) and thoughtful, imperfect engagement that can lead us past our cultural assumptions that what matters most about drugs takes place “in our own brains.”

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