In May 1970, when the United States bombed Cambodia, students at the University of Wisconsin went wild with angry frustration. At a huge meeting on the terrace of the student union, dozens proposed different measures we might take after years of fruitless protest. One compañera rose to her feet and announced that the students of Northwestern University had announced their secession from the Union and declared their campus a free republic. That night at home, I asked myself, “How could this be? Was there no good, no hope in human history?” An idea came to me, very small in relation to the problem but vital to me. I recalled a life-giving historical movement I had studied. That was the crusade for education and art launched from Mexico City by José Vasconcelos in 1921 in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. I decided to write my dissertation on that movement. I was naive, of course. Vasconcelos’s crusade was as full of contradictions as any other historical event. But it was constructive, not violent, and there began my personal quest to understand the puzzle of Mexican culture. As I have moved from Mexico City, where I studied the educational and arts policies of the 1920s, to Puebla and Sonora, where I sought to understand the implementation of educational policy as a negotiated community experience in the 1930s, back to the capital to explore the learning experience of an individual who participated in the youth rebellions of the 1960s, I have discovered ever new layers of multitextured, historically sedimented cultures that differ from region to region across classes and ethnicities and that move
within different time frames. Almost always what I have learned flies in
the face of what I had assumed and has required reassessment. In the
course of my journey, I have met magnificent people who have helped me
understand. Especially, I have had extraordinary guides and mentors in
four intimate friends: Carlos Schaffer Vázquez, Epifanio López, Marco
Antonio Velázquez, and before his death in 1998, Sergio de la Peña. My
debt to them runs very deep.

In this project, which has lasted over ten years, I am immeasurably
indebted to José “Pepe” Zúñiga, who opened his educational odyssey to
me. As his story is the subject of the book, let me simply say here how
exhilarating it was to learn that we shared many experiences, as likely
did thousands in different parts of the globe who challenged the social,
political, and artistic order in the 1960s. He took me through the leg-
endary Colonia Guerrero, where he introduced me to childhood friends
and acquaintances and to his places of memory. I learned so much from
his brothers Jesús (Chucho) and Efrén and his cousins Nicolás, Susana,
and Marta. Pepe took me to art exhibits and to the homes and studios
of his friends from youth, distinguished painters Guillermo Ceniceros,
Esther González, Juan Castaneda, Elba Garma, and Elizabeth del Cas-
tillo Velasco, the celebrated caricaturist Rogelio Naranjo, and the equally
celebrated scenographer Felida Medina. I was fortunate as well to meet
muralist Daniel Manrique, engraver Carlos García, and painter Pedro
Banda before their deaths. I had the pleasure of interviewing the widows
of Pepe’s mentors, painter Benito Messeguer and journalist, art critic,
and historian Antonio Rodríguez. We visited Alicia Ursuastegui, Beni-
to’s wife, in her home and his former studio in San Gerónimo. María
Antoinette Fernández Moreno de Rodríguez and her son, Cuauhtémoc
Rodríguez, came to Pepe’s apartment in the Colonia Guerrero to talk
about Don Antonio’s radical political beginnings in Portugal and his
professional life in Mexico City.

Evenings spent with Guillermo Ceniceros and Esther González in
their home and studio in the Colonia Roma were much more than in-
terviews: they were a communion of memories, sentiments, and opin-
ions remarkably shared yet so enriching because of their singularities,
all deepened by singing the songs of the Chilean Unidad Popular, by
good wine, and by Esther’s superb cooking. On several occasions, I had
the pleasure of getting to know Manrique and his compañera and wife,
Brisa Avila López. What stands out to me most in one of our encounters
in Pepe’s studio was his and Daniel’s detailed explanation of lucha libre
as an art form—and Brisa’s insistence that it was violent. In his home in
the Colonia Condesa, journalist and ecologist Ivan Restrepo provided us with a detailed history of the arrival and reception of Afro-Cuban music in Mexico City in the 1940s and 1950s, to which Pepe as a fan had much to contribute. He knew all the groups and their instruments. Ivan and I found other experiences in common for we had both been involved in international agrarian reform politics in the 1960s, he out of the Instituto Politécnico Nacional in Mexico City and I as a graduate assistant at the Land Tenure Center in Madison.

On long car rides to Oaxaca, Pepe and I discussed the radio programs he had heard, the music he loved, and the films he had seen as a child and youth. In my home in Tlalixtac, we watched countless movies and listened to many songs that conjured up his memories (and mine) and provoked extended dialogues. On occasion, Pepe's brothers Chucho and Efrén and their cousin Nicolás joined us in Oaxaca. We engaged in discussions about what did and did not happen, delighting in recalling the nitty-gritty sexuality of daily life and the moments both of rollicking humor, music, and dance and of deep wounding and sadness. We cried a lot. We walked through the streets of Carmen Alto, where these boys had been born and spent their first years; we visited Carmen Alto church, relatives, their primary school, their tiny home in a sprawling vecindad. We watched the procession in honor of the Virgin de la Soledad in the atrium of her church. Chucho taught me to sing “Oh María, madre mía, Oh Consuelo del mortal, amparadme y guíadme a la patria celestial.”

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