

Acknowledgments

Intellectually, politically, and personally, the topic of this book picked me as much as I picked it. The question of rural teachers first began to tug at me in the early 2000s when I was working on my first book about a postrevolutionary agrarian movement. The more I delved into Mexico's twentieth-century history of campesino resistance, the more I encountered the countryside's teachers, as organic intellectuals, as advisers, and as leaders. My search for answers about their persistent presence led me to the rural normales, utterly unique institutions whose politicized student body often made headlines for mounting roadblocks, staging demonstrations, or otherwise disrupting business as usual. From predominantly poor backgrounds, the youths who attended these boarding schools couched their demand for an education in the language of socialism, an ethos that, I came to learn, was a constituting element of their school culture. The fact that their student association defined itself as Marxist-Leninist was fascinating to me, having grown up in a Marxist household but coming of age after the fall of the Berlin Wall when, even among the leftist groups with which I participated, many insisted on a new analytic paradigm. And then there was my own childhood in rural Mexico, where I attended my town's public elementary school, precisely the type where rural *normalistas* would have been sent to teach. Precarious in so many ways, it was better off than most rural schoolhouses because it went up

to sixth grade. Still, its predominantly campesino and indigenous student body was unstable. Youngsters were pulled out during harvest season to help their families, and many had to join the labor market before reaching sixth grade. I remember clearly my sixth-grade cohort being half the size of the first-grade class.

In various ways these dynamics shaped my connection to the world of rural *normalismo*, and I am ever indebted to those who assisted me in reconstructing it. In Mexico, numerous *compañeros* and *compañeras*, colleagues and friends, helped me navigate the vast network of schools, teachers, students, and archives necessary to write this book. Luis Hernández Navarro was an ever generous source of contacts, stimulating discussion, and a treasure trove of knowledge about Mexico's education policy—past and present. His own work with, and participation in, the democratic teachers' movement, is a powerful example of the best tradition of the committed intellectual. I feel fortunate to call him a friend. My research in various parts of Mexico would not have been possible without the kindness of people like Alma Gómez Caballero, who opened her home to me and introduced me to other normalistas who, like herself, participated in local and national struggles. In Oaxaca, Rogelio Vargas Garfias led me through the rich and multifaceted world of the state's militant teachers. His warmth and tireless struggle are inspiring amid the seemingly insurmountable odds faced by teachers and students in Mexico's poorest regions. I will likewise always be grateful to those dissident teachers who accompanied me through hard-to-reach parts of the countryside. Those journeys, those conversations, and the people I met will long remain with me. In Zacatecas, I am grateful to Martín Escobedo for his help accessing the local archives of San Marcos. Marcelo Hernández Santos, Sergio Ortíz Briano, and Hallier Arnulfo Morales Dueñas have also been enormously supportive. Always eager to help clarify some of *normalismo's* intricacies, they have been valuable colleagues in the process of writing this book. I am likewise grateful to Siddharta Camargo, who generously provided fruitful contacts for key parts of this research. In Morelos, Guillermo Franco Solís helped guide me through the fascinating world of Amilcingo's rural *normal*. During my visits to various rural normales current students gave me tours of their campuses and shared their experiences of study and struggle. I am grateful that they allowed me in, even during delicate moments such as when they had shuttered a campus as protest. In the wake of different acts of state repression, student leaders spoke to me with pride and determination, even as their precautionary measures and a tendency to look over their shoulder revealed the extent to

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