Preface

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IN 2009 I WAS INSPIRED TO COLLABORATE WITH SALVADOR Vidal-Ortiz and Uriel Quesada on this book, primarily as a way to satisfy my personal need to document the period of LGBT Latina/o activism that I experienced in the 1980s and 1990s, *la época de oro* (a phrase coined by José Gutiérrez to describe this period of our history when Latina/o LGBT groups and organizations flourished in the United States and Puerto Rico). In my view, this period has been significantly underdocumented—and when it has been documented, the accounts have included errors about the people involved and the sequence of events. This book aims to offer new perspectives on the history of Latina/o activists and their organizations. The result of a collaborative effort between sixteen people, *Queer Brown Voices* covers more than three decades of activism and several geographical locations across the United States and Puerto Rico, from Los Angeles to San Juan. The personal narratives within give the reader a glimpse into the lives of the activists and reveal why it was important to them to participate in the LGBT Latina/o movement of the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. My hope is that this collection will serve as an introduction—a primer, if you will—to what I anticipate will be a wealth of stories to be told in the future. Sadly, there are some stories that will never be told from the first person, because we lost so many gay Latinos to HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s and have lost several lesbian Latina activists in the years since. Fortunately, due to activists' efforts to collect and archive their own history, we have access to documents and other materials that show firsthand proof of organizing efforts, even when the original voices are lost. José Gutiérrez's chapter, in particular, shows the extent of activists' efforts both to make history and to preserve it.

In 2007 Salvador, Uriel, and I were involved with the GLBT Latino History Project (LHP) in Washington, D.C. In 2009, out of our experiences of working on the LHP archives, planning to conduct oral histories, and facing the challenges of making such histories public, we began to collaborate on this project. In the process of identifying and finding potential contributors for this book, we first reached out to activists whom Salvador and I knew from our own previous activist work. We also received referrals from colleagues linking us to activists whom we did not know but felt would be important contributors, and we did research to identify activists in regions we wanted to include. We then contacted activists from across the United States and Puerto Rico with an invitation to join us in the process of writing and editing this work as well as to participate in interviews for oral history chapters. Initially, we asked all the contributors to address a few basic questions on an abstract, while as editors we discussed topic areas that we strongly felt needed to be included. Although we received many abstracts for the book, personal challenges, time conflicts, busy work schedules, and even editorial differences limited the completed chapters to a total of fourteen contributions. While it was a self-selected sample of activists, we intended to have as much gender parity, regional representation, and balance between lesbians, gay men, and transgender people as possible (none of the activists self-identified as bisexual). We also sought to have a balanced number of activists from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

Queer Brown Voices blends two types of first-person narratives. Six chapters are based on first-person essays written by our contributors, and eight chapters are based on oral history interviews (a number of them recorded in Spanish) that were all conducted and edited between June 2011 and June 2012. We used an interview guide to conduct the oral history interviews; it included questions very similar to those asked of the essayists so that the content between both formats would be consistent. The process of collecting the narratives was time-consuming because we were working with the contributors' schedules and developing the format of the chapters as we received submissions. Our work included supporting the drafting of chapters (in the case of the first-person essays) and sharing and exchanging them back and forth, sometimes six to eight times. It was also challenging, at times, to set up an oral history interview date and time with potential contributors, especially because we wanted to have two editors present at each of the interviews. I particularly enjoyed the experience of conducting the oral interviews, because of their collaborative nature and the opportunity to reflect on the interviews with my coeditors afterward.

Regardless of whether activists wrote or we interviewed them, the editing process was extremely rigorous. We shared multiple drafts with each other before sending a draft back to a contributor. We also held numerous conference calls to debate some of the potential challenges in each and every one of the chapters you will read. As editors, we never questioned who was going to be the author, regardless of the modality; we decided that the activist was author. Our editorial role was to be actively engaged with the material and, in most cases, to provide a close line-by-line editing. In addition, because we were assisting, in a way, in the creation of a narrative and in identifying key points in the narrators' lives, we asked for further information or suggested cutting down on some information that seemed less central to the narrative we were collectively producing. Similarly, we edited out information from the oral histories that was less relevant to the goals of the project.

As editors, we were committed to keeping the activists' own voices and stories intact as much as we could. We also tried to see the drafts from our own present and past points of view: as scholar, activist, or scholar-activist; as U.S. Latina/o, third-generation Chicana, or immigrant; as gay, lesbian, or queer identified; as mestizo or light-skinned Latinas/os. We also asked the contributors for more detail and clarification, for fact verification, and for more analysis of the facts. Each discussion and the ensuing suggestions for rewriting gave us a clearer understanding of the history at each of the sites discussed by the activists. Uriel and I wrote the chapters based on oral history interviews, and Salvador and I translated the transcriptions of interviews conducted in Spanish, all the while keeping faithful to the voices of the activists, which was especially true in the translation of the oral histories from Spanish to English.

As we read the contributors' drafts over and over, we sought to maintain a commitment to the storytelling format, even when details contained in a personal narrative contradicted the greater story of the movement. These inconsistencies in the narratives, acronyms, names of organizations, names of people, and specific dates of events are a factor of differences in how activists recall events many years after they took place. For some activists, the names and places and dates are less important than the events; others have a photographic memory when it comes to those details. In most cases we corroborated the information by contacting the activists. When this was not possible we sought alternative sources, such as archived materials. Herein is one learned benefit and value of archiving materials. As we were developing this book, we learned of several LGBT Latina/o activist collections housed at uni-

versities, in addition to history projects like the GLBT Latino History Project we had already worked on together. Given the overlapping histories and shared participation of some of the activists included in this book, some organizations are mentioned repeatedly. This is a reflection of the interconnectedness of Latina/o activists during that period of time. For example, most of the book's contributors were somehow connected to the National Latino/a Lesbian and Gay Organization, LLEGÓ.

Another one of our challenges was to determine how to handle translation of the Spanish-language contributions, which included four oral history interviews and one essay. We shared the original transcription or chapter with each other along with a draft of the translated document. In the process, we sometimes identified words in Spanish that had no clear equivalent in English. For instance, in Adela Vázquez's chapter she uses the term *bugarrón*, which is Cuban slang for a heterosexual man who does not identify as gay but who "tops" other men. We decided that such a term was better left in Spanish, as it conveys a meaning not easily translatable. In the end, we believe the intent of the narrative will be understood by readers of English. We also decided to keep colloquial expressions in their original sense when stated in Spanish (even when problematic to us as editors) to maintain the spirit of what the activists said. One example is when Adela Vázquez talks about women born female, and she refers to them as "normal" women. While we do not see trans as abnormal, because it was said both in the Spanish context and in the voice of a trans woman, we knew what she meant to convey.

In the spirit of LGBT organizing we met several times, retreat style, to read and make final edits to all of the chapters; to draft our preface, introduction, and conclusion; and to finalize other editorial details. We also engaged in numerous conversations where we discussed the implications of the contributors' statements—aspects of gender, class, and ethnicity, as well as the influence of the narrators' sexual identities on some of the ideological positions they took—in order to better understand the meaning of what they were telling us. What you see in this book is the result of four years of such thought and discussion.

Our goal is to provide the reader—and especially the young LGBT Latina/o—with knowledge about the history of Latina/o LGBT activism in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Our expectation of students, scholars, and historians is that they see an opportunity to build upon our work and to contribute further to the body of evidence

of LGBT Latina/o activism and its positive impact on the larger LGBT Latina/o community. I have never found this goal to be more important than today. In 2008 I participated in a workshop on creating a national agenda of LGBT Latina/o issues where the majority of participants had no idea that there had once been a national Latina/o LGBT organization (LLEGÓ). Up until the 1980s, the gay and lesbian movement in the United States was largely known as white. People of color were not highly visible in news coverage by either the gay press or the mainstream press. Nor were people of color visible in key leadership positions in the nascent gay and lesbian organizations that were formed after Stonewall. Worse, sexism, racism, and classism served to exclude lesbian and gay people of color from influencing decision making—and even excluded them from entrance to some gay bars. Hence, in the 1980s some of us were compelled to act and to get involved in our communities. Organizations, support groups, and clubs for lesbian and gay people of color seemed to sprout up overnight in major urban areas of the United States and Puerto Rico. This vibrant local and national community of activists focused both on organizing in their communities to create space for Latinas/os in a predominantly white gay and lesbian culture and on creating national visibility so as to be included in discussions on the issues of the day. I was then, and will forever be, proud of being part of that history.

For Latinas/os, whose issues are not solely gay issues, being viewed as “other” was one element to factor in when becoming an activist. In 1988 at a national gay and lesbian conference I heard a white gay peer announce to the room that he wanted us (people of color) to “check our color at the door” because it would get in the way of working together on what was deemed more important (to him)—gay liberation. The messages I received from that experience were “being free to be gay and lesbian is most important” and “I don’t care about your Latino issues.” I later witnessed this again during national march platform discussions on whether to include immigration issues. I am sure I am not the only Latina/o or person of color to recount such experiences.

As Salvador, Uriel, and I collected the stories of our peers during 2010 to 2012, we encountered many similarities. I found aspects of my own coming-out experience mirrored in some of the other contributors’ essays and oral histories. Having come out in a predominantly white gay and lesbian environment, I was immediately faced with racism, sexism, and classism. I remember feeling isolated and asking myself, “Where do I fit in?” The gay and lesbian bars of 1980s Houston

were mostly white. The organizations that existed were also mostly white, and they reflected the values and experiences of the dominant gay and lesbian society—values that were not necessarily my own.

The stories collected for this book recount personal experiences during a period of time in which activists came together to support each other and to work toward common causes that had meaning to them as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Latinas/os. You will find that relationships with lovers, family, friends, and community are important features of many of the narratives. Indeed, reflecting on my personal experience as a Latina lesbian activist brought back so many fond memories of people whom I met along the way. Many remain good friends today, like Dennis Medina, Gloria Ramirez, Laura Esquivel, and Brad Veloz. But the experience also brought forth painful memories of watching dear activist friends, like Arcadio Torres and Joe Perez, die in their youth of AIDS. Many talented, bright, and loving individuals were lost in the 1980s and 1990s to what was then an unmanageable disease.

For practical reasons we decided to make the turn of the century the book's end point. First, for the purpose of the oral histories, we needed a specific period of time around which to center the narratives. Second, we were most interested in the period of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as the height of Latina/o LGBT activism. Yet after collecting the narratives, we realized that one cannot set arbitrary limitations of time to convey a historical set of processes, and for that reason you will see that some of the chapters do not simply end in 2000. Many of these activists continued their involvement with groups and organizations beyond that time. Ultimately, the recounting of these later experiences offered a richer sense of the life narratives of the activists involved.

I will be eternally grateful to Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, who prompted me to think about this book with the question, "Well, what do you want to do about it?" He asked this in response to my anger and disappointment that a scholar had published as fact an untruth regarding the identity of the founder of LLEGÓ. Salvador's question and his offer to help publish this book opened my eyes to the possibility of documenting Latina/o LGBT history for future generations. I also wanted to set the record straight on some events in the history of Latina/o LGBT activism that had not been committed to paper by the activists themselves or had been portrayed inaccurately. Uriel Quesada has my highest admiration for his gentle prodding and for helping us stay on task during the last four years. Both Uriel and Salvador brought their academic experience in writing and publishing to bear, which was a tremendous

learning experience for me, a nonacademic. These two gentle, smart, passionate men were a pleasure to work with. We exchanged hundreds of emails and spent hours on conference calls discussing our progress via Skype and encouraging each other in spite of our individual busy lives and schedules. They were also extremely generous in sharing their access to some financial resources that, combined with our personal contributions, helped bring this book to you. It was an intense, but ultimately easy, collaboration, and we enjoyed many moments filled with laughter.

Finally, I am extremely grateful to the contributors, who freely gave their time to be interviewed for the oral histories or to write their personal stories. That they shared their stories with you is as much a labor of love as the valuable time they have devoted to activism, so deeply felt, on behalf of their Latina/o LGBT communities.

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