

L.A. INTERCHANGES

A Brown & Queer Archival Memoir

By Lydia R. Otero

EDITOR'S NOTE: In 2020, Dr. Otero shared childhood stories from their memoir, *In The Shadows of the Freeway, Growing Up Brown & Queer* with an Esperanza audience. In January 2024, Dr. Otero returns to read from their new archival memoir *L.A. Interchanges*. A reprint of the book's introduction follows.

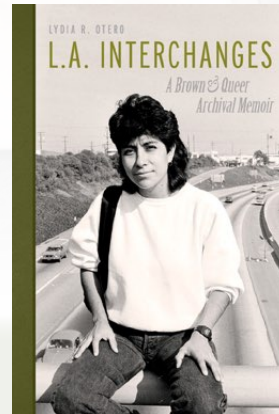
It is impossible to pinpoint when I fell in love with Los Angeles. An image of me at the beach while still in diapers hints that it happened early. The photograph captures a determined spirit who, despite shaky balance, continues to move forward seeking a modicum of independence. Growing up, I spent all my summers in Los Angeles with my maternal family. I understood that the city's vastness made it easy to get lost, but during my stays, I also picked up on its openness. The neighborhood kids I met and played with on the streets of Boyle Heights did not care where I came from, because many of them were from other places too. I discerned the advantages a big city offered as my queerness began to bloom and my preference for boy's clothing and activities began to be scrutinized in my hometown of Tucson, Arizona. On a map, L.A.'s amalgamation of freeways resembled noodles; but on the ground, the distinctive neighborhoods, the faces of people of different ethnicities and races, and the gender outlaws that I spotted on the streets and buses all seemed to have a unique story to tell. Their stories, like my own, often centered on seeking second and third chances.



FIGURE 1.1 Author at Santa Monica Beach, 1956. Private collection of author.



Cover photo @ Laura Aguilar



I had a major breakthrough the day before I left Arizona, though, thanks to a movie soundtrack. The highpoint of my life then was spending Saturdays at the movies. The advent of multiplex theaters made it possible to pay for one ticket, watch a film, then wander into another one. That Saturday, I sat through *Oh, God!* with George Burns, then slipped into *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. Although I missed the first fifteen minutes, the trailers had led me to believe it celebrated a liberated woman who embraced her sexuality. But the film was disturbing, and the characters were troubled. Even so, the nightclub scenes and the soundtrack were alluring. About three-quarters of the way into the film, chills went through my body as Thelma Houston's soulful voice broke into "Don't Leave Me This Way":

Baby! My heart is full of love and desire for you!
Now come on down and do what you got to do.
You started this fire down in my soul.
Now can't you see it's burning out of control.

Houston's voice and tone, the song's beat, the lyrics and rhythm all mesmerized me. The way the song intensified and softened many times over filled me with unexpected emotion.

When the song was over, I was a different person. I stayed in my seat for a moment, stunned at what I had experienced and what I felt—an inner craving to be part of a crowd, on a dance floor large enough to hold many bodies, gyrating to music like the song I had just heard—a need to express locked-up desires by moving my body in a lit-up place where I could simultaneously disappear, see others, and be seen by others. More than anything, I wanted to celebrate my life.

Until then, I had resisted going to bars because I had not worked through the dreadful times when my father brought me to bars as a child. Going to a bar felt like moving backwards to me, but that afternoon, I longed for that indulgence. I knew it existed in Los Angeles, and I knew I had to find it.

I did not watch the rest of the film. I realized at that moment that I had waited too long to make my next move. I drove back to my small apartment, started packing, and called my mother to tell her I was leaving for Los Angeles. To quash her concerns, I lied and told her there was a job lined up for me there. She encouraged me, probably because she had not witnessed excitement from me in a long time. Maybe she also knew Los Angeles offered her queer child more possibilities.

I fit all my belongings into my compact car and drove off at 2:00 a.m. with renewed resolve to love myself and enjoy my life. I had just turned 23 years old. By this time, I knew from experience that I could not separate my Brown self from my queer self. These interlocking pieces formed the core of my being. Although I did not immediately find Brown and queer groups, the time and place offered me the opportunity to meet others like myself.

After my queer cousin who I grew up idolizing unexpectedly passed on her apartment to me, I became an active member in Lesbians of Color (LOC) and the short-lived Lesbianas Latina Americanas. In the 1980s, I joined and eventually became a leader in Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos (GLLU). I was also a founding member of Lesbianas Unidas (LU). Together we worked to create new spaces and expand the range of existing ones. GLLU jumped at the chance to support the endeavors of multiethnic or rainbow coalitions, but we never lost sight of the need to prioritize ourselves. As we met in our homes, typically small apartment rentals, we transformed them into sites that launched Brown and queer mobilizing, organizing, and socializing. In the latter part of the 1980s, I also stood with those who found themselves infected with HIV/AIDS and fought to ensure more services to battle the virus. Through GLLU, I played an active role in launching Bienestar, a community-based healthcare and social services organization.

Ten years after I watched *Oh God!*, I was waiting for an elevator at Cedars-Sinai Hospital; when the door opened, the sole passenger, standing toward the back, was George Burns. Caught off guard, I said, “Hello, God.” He responded by saying, “Hello, dear.” I turned and held in my laughter as we both rode the elevator to our floor.

When I encountered Burns, I was as an electrician in L.A.’s Local 11 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), there to update the emergency call system at the hospital. I was dressed in men’s Levi’s 501 jeans, a dark blue T-shirt, and work boots. I also wore a hard hat, safety goggles, and a tool belt. I was covered in a slight layer of dust and carried a roll of metal-clad armored electrical cable on my shoulder. Despite these trappings, when I walked into the elevator, Burns quickly read the contours of my female body and referred to me as “dear.”

Although much of this book will focus on my efforts as a Brown and queer community-builder in Los Angeles, I also used my body and physical labor to build the city. As an electrician during the 1980s, I was part of construction teams that built some of the most iconic buildings in Los Angeles, such as the Library Tower—now known as the U.S. Bank Tower and, at the time, the

tallest building in Los Angeles—the dynamic Universal Studios’ CityWalk, the 105 Freeway and the initial phases of the Metro Rail that now spans outward to the beaches and surrounding mountains. I also worked at some local film studios and took part in the Central Library renovation after fires in 1986 caused extensive damage.

As the opening paragraphs of this introduction make clear, my journey involved listening to popular cultural influences and the larger social and political forces of the time. Born in Tucson, Arizona in 1955, I was influenced by the optimism of the 1960s. In junior high school, learning about the civil rights and women’s liberation movements allowed me to understand that a more just society and more expansive opportunities, not available to my parents’ generation, awaited Brown youth like me.

The earlier chapters in *L.A. Interchanges* address these idealizations and how my relationship with my family nurtured my deep connection with Los Angeles. I used my previous experiences of living in the city with my Los Angeles family to anchor my new life here. The early chapters also provide insight into the evolution of my political consciousness. Most personal histories of political transformation do not follow a linear path. Mine certainly did not. When I moved to Los Angeles, I engaged in relationships or employment that did not benefit me much but provided me with opportunities to learn and to consider different options. I cannot stress enough how important it was for my personal development to explore possibilities and to make what seemed like mistakes at the time. Although I arrived yearning to meet and organize with Brown queers, I needed to find them. This meant I needed to organize my life in a way that made doing so a priority.

I currently identify as nonbinary. During most of my adulthood, society insisted on enforcing idealizations based on the existence of two genders: women and men. Throughout *L.A. Interchanges*, I refer to myself as that assigned at birth, a female. In the 1980s, I fit however uncomfortably into the woman category, identified and organized as a lesbian. I also base my decision to refer to myself, experiences and relationships by the gender identities available during those decades to accentuate the gender realities of the times. Like everything else, clothing was gendered, and descriptors such as “men’s clothing” are intended as a representation of the time. I understand and respect why many nonbinary and trans people have different relationships to their childhood and past identities than I have, and why, for example, some transmasculine people will refer to experiences of their childhood self as a boy. As a Brown queer, my evolving gender identity, experiences and its complexities are a vital part of my story.

My memoir also offers a perspective of a Brown queer in the 1980s who intentionally did not seek community in a bar. As I briefly mentioned earlier, unresolved childhood issues linked to bars influenced my perspective of that world. My father, Daniel, was active in the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) post in Tucson and often volunteered to bartend at the club. Between the ages of eight and ten, despite my protests, I unwillingly accompanied him on his shifts as an unmonitored “volunteer” bartender. He should never have been allowed to tend to the bar. And, he should never have been allowed to take a child with him. Unfortunately, further lessons regarding alcohol dependency awaited me in Los Angeles.

Despite these experiences with alcohol, I became a social drinker and participated in bar culture by patronizing larger dance or disco clubs. I considered them sites of entertainment. Perhaps that is why I felt comfortable on dancefloors filled mostly with men. My quest to join and build alternative sites that made connecting with Brown queers outside of bars possible was motivated by my feminist leanings and knowing that I found women whose politics aligned with mine the ultimate aphrodisiac.

In 1998, I left L.A. and moved back to Tucson. On my visits to Los Angeles, I make it a point to drive by the buildings I helped con-



FIGURE 1.2 Author at Pride, 1987. Private collection of author.

struct. I sometimes ride the section of the Red Line Metro between Union Station and MacArthur Park to recall the months I spent beneath the streets installing the lights in the transit tunnel. Riding the train with friends allowed me to boast, “I built this!” And, on the way into and out of LAX Airport, when traveling underneath the Sepulveda Tunnel, I remind those friends kind enough to take me there that I installed the electric system that still lights it up.

About a few years ago, I went to Universal Studios by myself to see the fruits of my labor. I told the young person from whom I purchased my entrance ticket, “Twenty-five years ago, I was an electrician who worked on some of the rides and laid the underground electrical supply lines for CityWalk.” She smiled and said, “That’s so cool! I have never met anyone who helped build this place.” I walked away feeling impressed with myself. Despite changes and upgrades, I was able to locate subpanels and electrical stations I had installed in the large amusement park.

Plaques or dedications on buildings typically mention investment firms or philanthropists who funded their construction and the architects who designed them. The labor that went into their



FIGURE I.4 GLLU event held at Friendship Auditorium in 1982. Photograph by Louis Jacinto.

construction is systematically excluded. Although I do not have many photos of me working at the various construction sites, I carry many memories of my experiences as a tradesperson. Paystubs and other relevant documents that I have kept over the years also confirm the labor I invested in various construction projects that led to the existence of buildings or transportation systems that one can marvel at or travel today.

When in Los Angeles, I also visit meeting spaces or fundraising halls where Brown queers congregated and/or organized. For example, two organizations I was actively involved in, GLLU and LU, hosted a few fundraisers at the Friendship Auditorium on Riverside Drive near Griffith Park. When the thousands of people who attended events there drive past the large hall, I am sure that sometimes, memories of the music, dancing and maybe even the fundraising efforts they helped support flash through their minds. Like the buildings I wired as a tradesperson, no plaques or signage at the Friendship Auditorium provide direct evidence that Brown queers held events there or of the thousands who rallied to support their causes. Only story and voice can link memory to places.

During my time in Los Angeles, I squirreled away documents, as well as photographs of the Brown queer activists I worked alongside. Trained as a historian, I recognize that the date books, newsletters, meeting minutes, documents and pho-

BAILE CELEBRANDO EL VERANO, a Summer Celebration Dance co-sponsored by Connexus Women's Center and Lesbianas Unidas de GLLU, features the music of Cheena, a no-host bar, prizes and a clean-and-sober section. Breakfast Club/Friendship Auditorium, Riverside Dr. & Los Feliz Blvd.; Fri., June 6, 8:30 p.m.-12:30 a.m.; \$5. Call (213) 859-3960 or 391-5790.

FIGURE I.3 Advertisement of an event held at the Friendship Auditorium in L.A. Weekly, June 12, 1986, page 49.

tographs in my box are valuable primary documents. Each item provides direct evidence or personal testimony of an event or activity that took place during the 1980s. Thus, I refer to this book as an archival memoir because it is a documentation project. By integrating and building stories around the primary items in my collection, I am also activating them. *L.A. Interchanges* is a work of memory, but it is also a history. The inclusion of photographs also reminds me to focus on the everyday—that which I witnessed and participated in and which shaped my life a queer of color. Not only do I have a box full of photos and documents I have carried for more than twenty years, but I am able to associate a memory with each item in that box.

When I embarked on this book, more than two decades had passed since I lived in L.A. The response to my 2019 book that centered on my childhood in Tucson, *In the Shadows of the Freeway: Growing Up Brown & Queer* has been encouraging and rewarding. I am proudest that my hometown library gave it a 2021 Southwest Book Award. *L.A. Interchanges* picks up where that book ended. As I dove into writing about my days in Los Angeles, it helped to remind myself that I was *not* writing a comprehensive history of queer organizations and recognized leaders. If names of people recognized in LGBTQIA+ circles as memorable leaders are not mentioned in this book, it is because they were outside the circles in which I traveled, organized, and socialized.

I have had to make some difficult decisions regarding what to include in this memoir. Much of what I write fits into the category of microactivism or small actions that evidence the effectiveness of groups like GLLU to continually push boundaries. They also highlight a previously unacknowledged agenda to increase visibility and/or create new Brown queer spaces that prioritized Latine issues and concerns.

In *L.A. Interchanges*, I center myself as I moved to different sites and engaged with different people in the city during the 1980s. Few of the people of color I organized or collaborated with have made it into history books, and the names of some of my young gay friends who died of AIDS oftentimes never made it into an obituary or AIDS quilt banner. But as my story unfolds, my aim is to portray queers of color as makers of history.



FIGURE A.31 GLLU and LU around 1989. Private collection of author.