the dream of a common movement

SELECTED WRITINGS OF URVASHI VAID

EDITED BY
JYOTSNA VAID &
AMY HOFFMAN

Foreword by Tony Kushner

"America's most talented and articulate exponent of LGBTQ+ rights and liberation."
—RACHEL MADDOW

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COVER ART: Urvashi at Dyke March, 2011. © Donna Aceto. Courtesy the photographer.

For Urvashi

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FOREWORD

Tony Kushner

I believe fairly conventional things, among them—that power yields nothing without a demand and without some kind of countervailing power to win that demand; that organizing to more democratically redistribute power and access is how we will win change; that sex is as central to human beings as food, and as potent a motivator in our lives; and that the biggest job of intellectuals, be they in activist realms or in academic realms, is to disturb power and challenge tradition. — URVASHI VAID

Some people shouldn't die.

Urvashi Vaid succumbed to cancer at sixty-three years old, in May 2022. Those of us who knew and loved her are and aren't surprised at how keen our grief remains.

Urvashi was an activist. She was a leader of the LGBTQ+ community. She was a builder of bridges and a repairer of breaches; she was a restorer and a revolutionary. She was a pragmatist and a visionary. She was also a luminous human being, delightful, loving, loyal, compassionate, passionate, a sensual intellectual, an intellectual sensualist, a straddler and examiner of contradictions. She deeply enjoyed her renown, she relished her partner Kate Clinton's fame, she attracted a glittering array of semi-celebrities and full-blown celebrities, the great and the good, all of whom adored her. When her protean contributions weren't recognized or understood, as sometimes happened, it troubled her—but not very much, or at any rate, she seemed able to shrug off narcissistic injury. The work always mattered more to her than any acclaim and the work was always political and always collective. Urvashi knew that solipsism and self-promotion are destructive of community; she knew, with more certainty than most of the rest of us, that nothing is lovelier or more

thrilling or more sexy or more meaningful than the experiences of communal building and belonging, of actively participating in the efflorescence of power from within a community seeking liberation.

Urvashi Vaid was an activist, a political woman in whom anger and hope cohabited with remarkable, dynamic comity. Her rage against past injustices would explode, accompanied by horror and despair, and then, fed by some mysterious, powerful, eternal spring deep within, rage would surrender to a reasonably confident anticipation of justice being realized on earth in real time. One of her soul's principal leavening agents was an impatient patience; she knew that progress takes time and its paths are almost always corkscrew. But maybe those of us who depended so much on her wisdom, wit, prodigious energy, and courage shared a secret assumption that justice wouldn't dare not to arrive while Urvashi was alive.

So to repeat: Some people shouldn't die.

It'll be obvious to those who read the essays in this book that, in an important sense, in every sense other than the merely physical, Urvashi is very much alive. Anyone who makes a list of organizations she created or helped to create; the organizers, scholars, artists, politicians, lawyers, rich people, poor people, teachers and students with whose lives her life intersected; the journalism, advocacy, and protest alluded to in her writings—which form only part of the picture—will see that the sheer quantity of good she contributed to the world will ripple outward, uninterrupted by the tragedy of her death, building in strength, creating kinds of change Urvashi dreamed about and kinds of change she couldn't imagine. That's the tragedy: when progress happens, Urvashi ought to be there, to see it, to join it its shaping, to worry over its preservation and expansion, to dance in celebration. She loved to dance. She will be there, of course, in memory. This book will help progressive people remember who she was and why she mattered.

It will also help anyone who cares to understand what really went on in the tumultuous, excruciatingly painful, hideously reactionary, and electrifyingly revolutionary times through which Urvashi lived. She kept careful account of how exactly the LGBTQ+ movement coalesced after Stonewall. She paid rigorous attention when the nightmare of the AIDS epidemic overwhelmed us; she participated in the heroic refusal to surrender the forward momentum of liberation to a biological catastrophe (made infinitely more lethal by state and social hatred of queer people). She was equally rigorous in reporting the epidemic's revelations of vulnerability and interconnectedness, of the costs of class and race and gender, lessons circumscribed by failures of empathy, solidarity, and vision. In common with other great historians, Urvashi is true

to the truth of what happened; the facts, scrupulously recorded, analyzed as dispassionately as possible, render the profoundest judgments.

And yet Urvashi was not a historian. There's very little in this book written purely for the purposes of remembering or memorializing. All of these essays were intended to map out paths of political action. From fastidious observation, Urvashi in these speeches and articles is always gleaning lessons to be learned, distilling complicated experience to its practicable core, identifying from each of the several historical epochs through which she lived and in which she was an active participant and often a major figure, a handful of usable, workable, memorable tenets to take with us as we continue on with the fight. Even when she declares it her intention to remember, to write history, the activist can be discerned, fidgeting impatiently in the back seat, while the historian tells her story. Eventually, the backseat activist will clamber into the driver's seat, gently nudging the historian away from the steering wheel. Urvashi's interest in the past, serious as it is, always gives over in her writing to her immense passion for a better, more just, more humane future. Every sentence she writes inclines toward that future, every sentence urges her readers to understand and then act.

Urvashi is never, ever disdainful of thinking. The process that leads to effective political action, she tells us over and over, involves understanding, comprehending, even contemplating—as long as pensive inaction is genuinely a means toward answering the immemorial, central question: What is to be done? Unwilling to privilege economics over race and identity, and unwilling to subscribe or submit to any single theory, Urvashi wasn't a Marxist—or at least I don't think she was. I'm realizing now that I don't think I ever asked her if she was. But her sense of praxis, of the dialectical interplay of thought and action, is absolutely consonant with Marx's famous declaration at the conclusion of his *Theses on Feuerbach*: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."

This is, therefore, a book of essays of practical politics. Rhetoric is steadfastly avoided.

Even religion is subject to vigorous, precise language and hardheaded thinking. Urvashi recognizes the role of faith in progressive political struggle, both historically and personally. She acknowledges religion and spirituality, like cultural tradition, cultural difference, and identity, as forms of human energy indispensable to the fight for justice, which demands so much human energy. She recognizes the value of faith in making self-sacrifice possible—something else justice demands. Faith, she insists, is deserving of respect. But, ever the lawyer, she avoids theology and its attendant thickets. She never puts on prophet's

robes. When Urvashi calls for vision in the struggle for the good—critically necessary, as she never neglects to remind us—she never lapses into the incantatory or the vatic. Vision for Urvashi is not ooky-spooky immaterial; it's the creative application of intellect, passion, generosity, and daring ambition to concrete circumstance. Political energy and effectiveness are strengthened, not weakened, by aiming at large targets, by building coalitions, not just single-purpose movements, by attacking the roots of injustice rather than snipping off a few of its thorny tendrils and prematurely declaring victory.

If a philosophical construct can assist in clarifying or concentrating a point, Urvashi doesn't hesitate to employ it. She doesn't abuse theory, theorists, academics, or scholars, as some activists do; she's fully aware that effective action requires consciousness, conscientiousness, and intellectual as well as physical struggle. But it is an article of faith with Urvashi that no degree of complexity with which action is confronted in the abstract ever legitimately paralyzes the imperative to act. There's a statue of Giuseppe Mazzini in Central Park that rests on a plinth on which are inscribed the words "Pensiero ed azione"—thought and action. Activism is the only means to achieving synthesis.

And even when engaging in theoretics, Urvashi is allergic to language that excludes people who lack access to specialized vocabularies or knowledge. Her words are as deeply democratic as her politics. In what might be his last poem, Bertolt Brecht wrote:

> And I always thought: The very simplest words
> Must be enough. When I say what things are like
> Everyone's heart must be torn to shreds.
> That you'll go down if you don't stand up for yourself—
> Surely you see that.

Any writer's work describes three things simultaneously: the writer's times, the writer herself, and her imagined audience. As her work conjures up her audience, the writer reveals what she believes people are made of, what we're capable of—both for good and for evil—how capable we are, or aren't, of tolerating and creating change.

Chief among Urvashi's articles of activist faith, chief among the articles of faith of those who think that democracy is a good and workable way for people to attempt to live together, is an unbudgeable certitude in the demos, in the people. Urvashi's life and work are an affirmation of Brecht's prayerful poem. Our hearts will be torn by an awareness of injustice inflicted on others. We understand that unless we stand up for ourselves, we'll be destroyed. We are able to identify our own subjectivities, our own selves, our inalienable

rights, and we are able to extend that self-awareness to an awareness of the Other. Elizabeth Alexander concludes her poem "Ars Poetica: I Believe" by asking her reader, "and are we not of interest to each other?" Beyond doubt, Urvashi's answer to that all-important question would be a full-hearted and full-throated "YES."

That conviction in the fundamental reasonableness and goodness of people is today being challenged by local and global eruptions of malevolence unlike anything people of my generation have lived through, whipping our heads around to gaze with horrorstruck recognition at old forms of barbarism, long ago relegated to history's garbage heap, back now with and for a vengeance, fueled by an uncanny, insatiable, devouring energy, a determination to destroy that's a nightmare, mirror-reversal of progressive activism. In our present moment, the expectation of governance appears to have been abandoned by millions of people, for whom the political has become mainly a platform for gruesome public enactments of what's worst in us, of our most antisocial, anti-intellectual, xenophobic, sadistic, death-driven fantasies.

Are these essays, in this awful moment, of use? The years to which they bear witness were felt, by those who lived and struggled through them, to be very tough years, filled with many dangers and hardships; but there was an undergirding sense of the possibility of progress. In today's floods of calamity and cruelty, we're faced daily with the temptation to despair. Do we now read Urvashi's patient parsing of actual, discernible, empirical reality, her hope for change and her faith in human beings with (Goddess help us) nostalgia? Would it not be better to counter the right's kakotopia bacchanalia with, I dunno, performance art of our own?

I'm pretty sure Urvashi, after she'd finished rolling her eyes at "kakotopia bacchanalia," would be first in line for any festival of progressive performance art. But then she'd return to her work, which was an articulated and by-example insistence on the irreducible value of working as the only legitimate answer to the anti-politics of reaction and recidivism, as the only true means of refusing despair.

In the pages of this book we're given a great blessing: the privilege and joy of watching one of the best of us in her passages through the labyrinth, winding up in her deliberate way the threads that connect causes and consequences. Travel with her, and your understanding will grow, the ground beneath your feet will regain some of the solidity you'd felt it had lost. Despair is defeated by meaning. Engage with the life and work of Urvashi Vaid, and you'll feel less lost, and braver and smarter about where to go, how to live, how to build resistance, how to move and how to build movements.

FIGURE 1.1. Urvashi interrupts a speech by President George Bush at the National Leadership Coalition on AIDS Conference in Arlington, Virginia. She was escorted from the hall by Arlington police. March 29, 1990. AP Photo/Dennis Cook.

INTRODUCTION

Jyotsna Vaid and Amy Hoffman

On March 29, 1990, President George H. W. Bush was to give his first major policy speech on AIDS at the National Leadership Coalition on AIDS Conference. Among the five hundred invited attendees gathered to hear what initiatives the Bush administration would announce to address the crisis that had already taken 180,000 lives was a thirty-one-year-old woman of Indian origin, an out lesbian since college, and the executive director of the oldest and largest organization on LGBTQ rights, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. When it became clear that no new policy or funding initiatives were forthcoming in the president's speech, the young leader quietly opened her briefcase, stood to face the president, and held up a sign that said, "TALK IS CHEAP, AIDS FUNDING IS NOT." She was immediately escorted out by security. Her protest, captured in an image that was prominently featured in news coverage across the country, catapulted Urvashi Vaid onto the national stage as the face of peaceful but forceful resistance, and of personal courage and integrity.

Although that moment brought her national attention, Urvashi was already well known by then as a powerful advocate for social justice and a

skilled strategist who was as adept at writing policy briefs as she was at delivering rousing speeches. Lit from within, politics infused her life. Her favorite saying was "Praxis makes perfect." (She was so identified with the phrase that her friends later emblazoned it on T-shirts they created for her fiftieth birthday bash.) Urvashi came to that AIDS conference in 1990 with two decades of political activism already behind her. She had protested the war in Vietnam at the age of eleven, delivered her first political speech for a progressive candidate for president at the age of thirteen, organized in college at Vassar a divestment campaign against the apartheid regime of South Africa, and written for the influential Boston weekly *Gay Community News* while earning a law degree from Northeastern University.

Trained in gender and sexuality law, Urvashi started her career in the mid-1980s as a staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union. She then joined the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the youngest person and first person of color to assume the role of its executive director. She left the task force in 1993 to work on her first book, and later returned as director of the Task Force Policy Institute, commissioning several research reports and surveys. From her years in advocacy, she moved to philanthropy where, as deputy director of the governance and civil society unit at the Ford Foundation, executive director at the Arcus Foundation, and board member of the Gill Foundation, she helped shape funding policy and gave millions to support social justice projects. She was a visiting scholar at the City University of New York and a senior fellow and director of the Engaging Tradition project at Columbia University School of Law. From 2015 until 2022, she was CEO of the Vaid Group, LLC, a social-innovation consultancy firm, and its associated think tank, Justice Work, launching several important initiatives and networks. In a career that would span four decades, Urvashi became known, in the words of the *New Yorker* columnist and author Masha Gessen, as the "most prolific" organizer in the LGBTQ movement's history, sought after for her incisive analyses and political acumen.

The years between 1987 and 1993, when Urvashi was working at the Task Force, were a particularly significant period in the LGBTQ movement. As historian John D'Emilio observed, at a 2023 symposium held at Emory Law to commemorate Urvashi's legacy:

> The combination of the AIDS crisis and the transforming impact of the 1987 March on Washington created more rapid growth and an upsurge in militancy that dwarfed what emerged from the Stonewall uprising two decades earlier. Massive numbers of people were coming

out; funding for organizations expanded; more organizations had paid staff rather than simply volunteers; and LGBTQ-positive legislation was getting passed by Congress for the first time. So—the point is that Urvashi found herself in a critically important role at a critically important historic moment.

As D'Emilio further notes, under her leadership, the work that the Task Force was already doing with Congress and the executive branch of the government expanded, with the passage of the Hate Crimes Statistics Act, a large AIDS care and prevention funding appropriation, and the inclusion of HIV-positive status as a protected category in the Americans with Disabilities Act. Urvashi brought a new approach to the Task Force, returning it to its roots as a grassroots organization. Under her leadership, the Task Force trained activists to "organize, organize, organize, and connect, connect, connect." Urvashi strongly believed that, to be effective, the LGBTQ movement had to build the movement at the local and state level. To facilitate these efforts, she and Sue Hyde, director of the Task Force's Privacy Project, cofounded the Creating Change Conference, as an initiative of the Task Force. This annual conference, launched in 1988, has become the largest national gathering of supporters of LGBTQ rights, drawing several thousand participants each year.

On April 25, 1993, at the third March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, Urvashi again captured national attention with a powerful speech, which was heard by the estimated one million people in attendance. Millions more have viewed and heard the live video of it on C-SPAN in the thirty years since. The speech, which wove together a call for coalition-building with an identification of the religious Right as a resurgent opponent of LGBTQ rights, ends with these words:

— Well, perhaps the religious Right is right about something.
— We call for the end of the world as we know it.
— We call for the end of racism and sexism and bigotry as we know it.
— For the end of violence and discrimination and homophobia as we know it.
— For the end of sexism as we know it.
— We stand for freedom as we have yet to know it.
— And we will not be denied.

These words ring through the decades as the core of Urvashi's vision; they toll now with her untimely passing from breast cancer in 2022, at the age of sixty-

three. Urvashi leaves behind a vast body of writing; several organizations, policy initiatives, and networks she launched; and generations of activists and scholars inspired by her example. For those who knew her life's work, Urvashi was an icon. For those who knew her personally, she was an icon and a treasure.

From her earliest days, Urvashi was passionate about righting wrongs. She was eloquent in articulating her progressive vision of LGBTQ liberation and controversial because of it. Often the only woman of color in the room in gatherings of movement leaders, funders, and activists, she demonstrated in her very being that identity is multi-dimensional and that the LGBTQ movement, if it is truly working for social justice, must be as well. In her outspokenness, so prominently on display that day during President Bush's speech, and in her speech at the March on Washington, she inspired both people to whom her perspective was brand new as well as those who shared it.

As part of her life-long involvement in movements for social, economic, and racial justice as a strategist, organizer, and scholar-activist, Urvashi was highly sought after as a speaker. Her speeches offer lessons for activists and scholars alike on how to build and sustain a movement for social justice. Her vision was intersectional and inclusive, from the beginning.

She would invariably begin her analysis of the status quo or, as she put it, the "status queer," by laying out the broader political, economic, or racial landscape within which to understand the issues at hand, and she would invariably conclude with a set of concrete recommendations for action. There were always things to do.

In addition to public speaking, Urvashi was a prolific writer, publishing articles, essays, legal briefs, invited columns and opinion pieces, policy-oriented surveys and research reports, and three books. Her first book, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (Anchor/Doubleday Books, 1995), made the case that the goal of the LGBTQ movement should not be assimilating into mainstream institutions, which gives only the appearance of equality; the goal should be liberation by transforming those institutions. The book won two awards and has garnered over a thousand citations. It became a classic in progressive circles, energizing a generation of younger activists who went on to become leaders in various social justice organizations.

Urvashi's second book, *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights* (St. Martin's Press, 2000), coedited with John D'Emilio and William B. Turner, brings together twenty-three essays by scholars and activists on how LGBTQ individuals and organizations were able to mobilize after Stonewall to bring about significant changes in public policy across a range of issues.

Her third book, *Irresistible Revolution*: *Confronting Race, Class and the Assumptions of LGBT Politics* (Magnus, 2012), is a collection of nine speeches. The book, as Urvashi notes in the introduction, "joins a lively, ongoing and decades-long conversation about the agenda, composition, and imagination of the LGBT movement," and argues that "an innovative LGBT movement must move beyond seeking the reform of laws to maximizing the life-chances, freedom, and self-determination of all LGBT people."

In her work and in her personal life, Urvashi had a unique talent for bringing people together from all kinds of backgrounds—professional, ideological, cultural, and racial. Her ever-expanding circle of friends included artists, musicians, athletes, policymakers, scholars, community organizers, philanthropists, faith leaders, and political leaders. By her own example, she inspired others to do more, and to bridge differences to build a better world together. Rooted in a pragmatic approach to movement strategy that emphasized coalition-building, her thinking was forward looking for its time and anticipated many of the key problems in progressive politics that we are still grappling with.

The insights and analyses Urvashi offered throughout her life remain startlingly relevant. As D'Emilio says, they came at a formative time in American civil rights history. Mobilized by the AIDS crisis, the movement for LGBTQ rights had grown into a national movement. At the time, the religious Right had not yet coalesced to become the dominant force it is today within conservative (and, increasingly, Republican Party) politics. The prescience of her 1993 speech, with its warning against the religious Right as the enemy of any movement for freedom and dignity, is all the more striking. Urvashi was not content with marriage equality as the goal of the LGBTQ movement, nor confident that the passage of laws granting protections to people on the basis of sexual orientation or gender expression meant LGBTQ people had achieved liberation: laws could always be repealed. Without a movement that saw the interconnection between racial justice, economic equality, and civil rights, and that actively sought to address the vast power of the Right, she felt that progress was doomed to unravel.

Themes of Urvashi Vaid's Movement-Building Work

Four themes of Urvashi's work are particularly relevant in the present moment.

LGBTQ Rights Are Human Rights

Urvashi believed that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are human beings who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. She ada-

mantly rejected the stigmatizing view of LGBTQ people as sinful, immoral, criminal, or dangerous. Beyond this belief, shared with others in the movement, Urvashi took issue with the view that the goal of the LGBTQ movement should simply be acceptance into the mainstream. Allied with the liberationist wing of the LGBTQ movement, she argued that assimilation into the "crumbling" mainstream world was not a model to aspire to and that the goal should be transforming existing structures. She pointed to forms of intimacy and resilience in queer culture that could serve as a model to emulate. As she wrote in her essay, "Assume the Position":

> Our subcultures turn pain into caring; our institutions deliver services, resilience, and humor instead of bitterness and violence; our extended kinship structures deliver emotional and material support, independent of blood ties. Our community is full of exceptional acts of generosity and affiliation with those who are social and political outcasts. (140)

Influenced by liberation theology ideas that political organizing must be guided by a moral vision, Urvashi reached out to others who were inspired by the same vision. She was among the first leaders of secular gay rights organizations to build relationships with progressive, faith-based organizations. In making these connections, she helped frame the struggle for LGBTQ rights as a civil rights struggle.

Single-Issue Organizing Has Limited Utility

Urvashi strongly believed that identity-based organizing (such as organizing around sexual identity or ethnic identity), although often necessary as a first step, is limited in its effectiveness and can actually forestall progress. To build and sustain a movement, connections beyond identity need to be drawn and coalitions formed. For example, in her analysis, the struggle to repeal abortion restrictions and reproductive rights more generally is an LGBTQ issue; it is the same struggle as repealing laws banning sodomy or, more recently, laws banning gender-affirming care. In all these cases, the issue is one of the state encroaching on an individual's right to make decisions about their body.

Liberation Has to Be for All, Not Just for Some

That liberation can only be achieved when the most vulnerable members of society are liberated is the third theme of Urvashi's work. She viewed liberation only for some as a hollow victory. As she pointed out in a 2016 talk, "Marriage = Virtual Equality":

> But marriage fails for the reasons that formal legal equality as an end goal fails: it does not deliver justice, transform family or culture, or expand queer freedom for all. It does not touch, much less end, structural racism; it does not change the enforcement of the gender binary; it does not deliver reproductive justice nor end familial homophobia. It has nothing to offer about ending mass incarceration and the systemic deployment of state violence against Black and brown communities. (142)

Know What You Are Fighting for, and Whose Vision You Are Fighting Against

Last, Urvashi believed it was imperative for a movement to articulate its vision of a better world, to know what it is fighting for. This also means knowing whose vision it is fighting against. In her view, the real enemies of the LGBTQ movement were not individuals who were prejudiced against gay people out of ignorance. The real enemy was the highly organized and well-funded Christian right-wing movement, with its close ties to authoritarian, white supremacist nationalism. This was a focus of Urvashi's organizing from her beginning days at the Task Force, when she launched a five-year campaign called Fight the Right, and it continued right up to the final months of her life, when she cofounded the 22nd Century Initiative to Counter Authoritarianism. Urvashi saw early on the existential threat the highly organized right-wing, autocratic movement in the United States and globally posed to individuals, to progressive movements, and to democracy itself, and devoted a good part of her efforts to organizing a broad-based movement on the Left that affirmed and protected democratic institutions and civil liberties.

To make change happen, Urvashi believed in—and used—a plurality of tactics. She recognized the value of direct action and grassroots protests, while also recognizing that elections matter, at all levels of government. She believed that protests can put needed pressure on those holding elected positions to effect change, while also recognizing the importance of voting progressive candidates into government.

The Dream of a Common Movement

This book brings together a representative selection of Urvashi Vaid's extensive body of work and includes both previously published essays and unpublished writings spanning thirty years that, collectively, articulate her "dream

of a common movement" (a turn of phrase inspired by the poet Adrienne Rich's phrase, "the dream of a common language"). Our intention is to introduce Urvashi's writings to those who did not know her and to deepen the understanding of those who did. The collection presents Urvashi's vision for achieving the dream of a common movement from a queer lens, which focuses on the dimensions she believed were critical for lasting revolutionary change.

The writings cover issues that Urvashi cared deeply about: the importance of political organizing; AIDS activism; gender and sexuality law; the state of the LGBTQ movement at different points of time; the power of money in shaping social justice movements; the need to center race, gender, and class equity in the LGBTQ movement's mission; the threats posed to democracy by the religious Right and white supremacy; and lessons learned from a lifetime in activism.

We structured the book into four parts, each highlighting a different aspect or phase of movement building. The pieces within and across sections are arranged roughly chronologically.

Part 1. Building a Movement

In the selections in this part, which comprise some of Urvashi's earliest writings, she describes her political philosophy and vision for building a progressive movement, rooted in her experiences directing the Task Force in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The first chapter, "Formative Influences," sketches the development of Urvashi's political identity and activism in her own words. The first half of the chapter contains an autobiographical essay that Urvashi included as the preface to *Virtual Equality* (1995). In it, she reflects on her arrival in the United States at the age of eight, the development of her political consciousness, her professional trajectory as an activist and leader, and her thoughts on the status and future of the gay rights movement in the United States. She noted in later interviews that her immigrant history—moving to the United States from a poor country at a young age—gave her a kind of "double consciousness," an early awareness of cultural difference that opened her up to differences in perspective. Similarly, she observed that the experience of being the only woman, out lesbian, or person of color in many of the circles in which she moved in her career often made her feel like an outsider, and speculated that the feeling of not belonging anywhere may well have shaped her focus on

transforming existing structures rather than conforming to them. The second half of "Formative Influences" consists of excerpts from letters Urvashi wrote to her family between 1979 and 1994, a period in which she moved to Boston after graduating from Vassar, plunged into grassroots activism while attending law school at Northeastern University, started her professional career in Washington, DC (at the ACLU and then at the Task Force), and then moved to Provincetown, MA, to work on *Virtual Equality*. The letters offer a window into the pace and texture of Urvashi's life as a rapidly emerging public figure in the LGBTQ movement.

Chapter 2, "A National Lesbian Agenda," is a keynote speech Urvashi gave at the 1991 National Lesbian Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. In the speech, she outlines her vision of a national lesbian agenda in which lesbians bring radical social change for the benefit of all people.

Chapter 3, "We Stand for Freedom as We Have Yet to Know It," is the full text of Urvashi's passionate 1993 keynote address at the third March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, in which she lays out why the religious "Right" is fundamentally "wrong"—morally, spiritually, and politically.

Chapter 4, "A Shared Politics of Social Justice," presents a wide-ranging 1998 interview with Alternative Radio host David Barsamian, which was subsequently published in an edited collection by South End Press titled, *Talking about a Revolution*, which also included essays by Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky, among others. In the interview, Urvashi discusses many aspects of her politics, including the relationship between the LGBTQ movement and a larger American Left, which often denigrated identity-based movements such as those of women and queer folk, as "divisive." In later essays, she delves more deeply into the importance but also the limitations of identity-based organizing.

Chapter 5, "Awakened Activism: AIDS and Transformation," is a lengthy discussion of the impact of the AIDS epidemic on gay rights activism. It is taken from *Virtual Equality*. The piece begins with a poignant portrait of a gay couple, close friends of Urvashi, as one of them cares for the other, who is very ill. The essay goes on to discuss the successes of the LGBTQ and AIDS movements in confronting the epidemic, as they cared for the sick and protested the indifference of government. The essay also points out the movement's failures, as it "de-gayed" the AIDS crisis.

Many in the national LGBTQ movement have implicitly constructed the LGBTQ community as white, male, and economically privileged. In this section, Urvashi makes the case that the only ethical and pragmatic way forward for the movement is to broaden its view of whom the movement stands for and to make racial, class, and gender equity a core commitment. This section highlights the development of Urvashi's politics. In *Virtual Equality*, she argued that obtaining legal rights was a necessary part of the LGBTQ agenda. She begins to explore the idea that fighting for formal legal rights is not enough, because queer people who are poor, of color, disabled, or marginalized in other ways will not be able to access legal rights unless the movement also fights for justice for everyone.

Chapter 6, "Inclusion, Exclusion, and Occlusion: The Queer Idea of Asian-Pacific Americanness," was the lead article in a special issue on South Asia in 2000 of the journal *Amerasia*. In it, Urvashi provides a thorough discussion of identity politics and its (limited) place in progressive social movements. She argues that people must understand their histories, traditions, and social contexts, but they must also unite with others beyond their particular community. Along the way, she discusses the evolution of her own Indian American, immigrant, queer identity.

Chapter 7 features Urvashi's unpublished remarks delivered at a historic conference in 2008, called Race, Sex, Power: New Movements in Black and Latino/a Sexualities, at the University of Illinois. In the essay, she focuses on the ways that race is muted and ignored both by progressives and in the mainstream, as they wish for a "post-racial, post-gender, post-gay" world. She notes that, for many prominent leaders of color, "the erasure of racial identity is the price of admission to the inner circles of power."

Chapter 8, "What Can Brown Do for You? Race, Sexuality, and the Future of LGBT Politics," was first presented as the 2010 Kessler Lecture at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, City University of New York, and is one of Urvashi's most important and nuanced essays. In the essay, Urvashi calls out the racism she and other people of color experienced in the LGBTQ movement and argues, as always, that a substantive treatment of racial equity has to be integral to the mission of the LGBTQ movement for the movement to progress. The essay documents the pervasiveness of a white racial frame in the LGBTQ movement, and notes that the movement has become ever-narrower and more normative as it seeks acceptance and legitimacy by the mainstream, moving "from its anti-militarist, anti-racist, and femi-

nist origins in the late 1960s to its present patriotic, patriarchy-accepting nationalism."

Chapter 9, "Assume the Position: Class and the LGBT Movement," is based on a 2011 invited talk at Vassar College. Finding herself at her alma mater, Urvashi reflects on how attending an elite college changed her class position, both economically and socially. She presents a detailed exposition of how class status affects how we see, want, and transform our conditions. In particular, she reminds us that our class position—the way we see and are seen—is raced and gendered, an observation that she illustrates in the context of the failure of the mainstream LGBTQ movement to grapple with class and economic inequality.

Chapter 10 presents unpublished remarks Urvashi delivered at the 2016 After Marriage Conference hosted by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in New York. In her talk, "After Marriage = Virtual Equality," she explains why gaining the right to marry does not at all mean that the work of the LGBTQ movement is over, as some marriage-equality activists believed.

Part 3. Taking Stock

In these later essays, almost all of which are unpublished, Urvashi used her experiences in philanthropy and academia to offer insights about how funding can shape a movement's focus. She also analyzed threats faced by the LGBTQ movement by the rise of authoritarianism.

In Chapter 11, "Queer Dreams and Nonprofit Blues: The Context in Which Nonprofits Operate," Urvashi presents a history of philanthropy and nonprofit organizations, arguing—in opening remarks at a 2013 conference that she convened with legal scholar and trans activist Dean Spade—that funding priorities must be set by the communities engaged in the work of making change, not by funding agencies.

Chapter 12, "Homo/mentum of the 'Status Queer': A Critical Look at the LGBT Movement," is taken from an invited lecture Urvashi delivered in 2015 at Rice University. She begins by noting the "astonishment" that activists feel as they look back on the movement's progress between the 1970s and 2015. Queer people are covered in the media and portrayed in films and television, they have gained the right to marry, and sodomy laws have been overturned. However, she warns that these gains are not enough. She envisions an "LGBT movement thinking beyond marriage and toward social justice . . . [in which] its organizations would not just be LGBT centered but would instead be progressive with an LGBT focus."

In Chapter 13, "Irresistible Revolution: Understanding the LGBT Movement," based on an unpublished talk delivered at a Global Women's Conference at Middle State Tennessee University, Urvashi concentrates on the threat the right wing, and the Trump administration in particular, poses not only to LGBTQ rights but to democracy itself. She discusses the growth of modern conservatism from the 1960s to the present, and explains that it is essential that the LGBTQ movement take up the challenge of confronting this dangerous trend.

One of the last initiatives Urvashi cofounded, along with racial justice activist Scot Nakagawa, was the 22nd Century Initiative to counter authoritarianism. Chapter 14, "The 22nd Century Initiative to Counter Authoritarianism," concludes this section, presenting their 2021 position paper on the initiative. The initiative's first action was a national conference organized by Nakagawa, in collaboration with Sue Hyde, in July 2023 in Minneapolis, which brought together more than three hundred progressive activists from around the country to talk goals and develop strategy.

Part 4. The Promise—And Precarity—Of Justice

In the final section, we gathered pieces that point to themes that preoccupied Urvashi in her later years: the faith required of activists, a global perspective, queer radicalism, and her own struggle with cancer. Although seemingly disparate, they are united by an overarching concern for justice and love.

In Chapter 15, "Politics as an Act of Faith—Ten Lessons from LGBT Activism," based on a 2009 talk to a faith-based organization and condensed from an essay published in *Irresistible Revolution*, Urvashi outlines her view of politics at its most inspired and shares ten lessons she has learned from a life in activism.

Chapter 16 is an invited op-ed piece from 2018 that was first published in the *Times of India*. In "Forward-Looking 377 Order Holds Lessons for the World," she celebrates the Indian Supreme Court's overturning of the country's colonial-era anti-sodomy law. At the same time, she cautions that while "court decisions declare what is lawful, . . . extra-judicial organizing, education, and political engagement will be needed to extend rights and realize equality for all LGBTQ people, not just a privileged few." (Her warning became even more relevant in 2023, when, instead of legalizing marriage equality, as LGBTQ activists had hoped, the Indian Supreme Court tossed the question back to the Hindu nationalist-dominated parliament.)

In 2019, at the fiftieth anniversary of the LGBTQ Stonewall Rebellion, *The Nation* magazine published a series assessing the movement. Chapter 17, "It's Time to Re-embrace a Politics of Radical, Queer, Outsider Activism," is Urvashi's hard-hitting contribution to that series.

Chapter 18, "Chemo Killed the Small-Talk Gene," is a reprint of a highly personal 2014 article that Urvashi wrote for a special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. It gives a devastating account of her "journey through diagnosis, treatment, and recovery" from thyroid and then breast cancer. It's worth remembering that she took this journey while at the same time doing much of the writing, teaching, and activist work depicted in this book. The story she tells is both personal and political: an account of personal stamina, community support, and the depredations of the US health care system.

Chapter 19, "Longevity Is a Precarious Dream," concludes this section. It is Urvashi's final public talk, delivered virtually in 2022, while she was undergoing treatment for a recurrence of her earlier bout with breast cancer. It was a speech given at the Creating Change Conference, accepting the 2022 Sue Hyde Award for Longevity in the Movement from the National LGBTQ Task Force. Urvashi ends it with a reflection on the precarious longevity of a movement, and of her life.

The final chapters of the book provide a brief early history and professional biography of Urvashi followed by an extensive bibliography of writings by her and about her.

As Urvashi noted in "Race, Power, Sex, and Citizenship," the goal of liberation should be "a fundamental redefinition of what is good and what is defined as evil," and "gayness is a moral good, . . . sexuality is good, and . . . sexual freedom—defined as the cultural transformation and opening up of ideas of sex and gender—must also be an integral outcome of our struggle for full human rights." Taken together, the compilation of her writings in this collection showcase the inclusive vision that undergirded Urvashi's dream of a common movement and motivated her persistence in pursuing it.

How This Book Came Be

To provide a context for how this book came into being, we first offer a brief account of who Urvashi was to us, individually.

JYOTSNA: Urvashi (or "Urvash" as she was known in our family) was my sister, the youngest of three girls. We attended the same schools—in India and in America—and even the same college, and thus had many

shared experiences. I was the shy and serious one, while Urvashi had a magnetic exuberance of spirit that drew people to her. She was generous, loving, and fun to be around. To her niblings—Alka, Alok, Kaveri, and Shantanu—she was an anchor, a cool *masi*, who took an active interest in their lives. In caring for our parents in their final years, Urvashi was all in, even as it clearly took a toll.

Over the years Urvash and I had many long conversations about our professional and personal lives. She was always interested in what I was doing, writing, or worrying about, and would tell me what she was thinking about, politically and personally. In the last few years, she was on a campaign to have me move to the East Coast, to be closer to her and our other sister. Undeterred by my objections that I could not afford to live in New York, she would send me real estate notices of apartments in her neighborhood. At some point I stopped raising objections. After all, moving to New York would mean being near her; being able to share meals, discuss books, movies, and politics; play Scrabble, dance, and argue, in the best Vaid tradition. But that was not to be.

I am grateful that I was able to spend meaningful time with Urvash in New York just before the pandemic, and to visit her and Kate in Provincetown just after, when she was undergoing treatment in the summer of 2021, and to see her again in New York a year later and be by her side in her final days. Losing my brave and beautiful younger sister has been the hardest of losses. We were going to grow old together. Putting this book of her writings together has helped keep her close. And to know—and love—her in a deeper way.

AMY: I met Urvashi when I was twenty-eight. I had just become the managing editor of *Gay Community News*, and she was twenty-two, in her first year of law school at Northeastern University. She and I were introduced by Richard Burns, GCN's previous managing editor and my best friend, who had encountered Urvashi on their first day of law school, as Urvashi positioned herself in the middle of the student lounge and ostentatiously read a copy of GCN, advertising her sexuality and politics to all and sundry.

Urvashi and I were lovers for two years, and after we broke up we stayed close, as lesbians do. When love comes around, we don't let it go. We were part of each other's queer family (Richard Burns, too) for the next forty years. She and I shared a politics of an expansive, feminist, anti-racist, joyous queer movement, but after those early years,

we didn't do our political work together. She was on the national stage, while I stayed local, in Boston, and became a writer. Our relationship was simply personal.

Everyone who encountered Urvashi experienced her generosity. She donated lavishly to all sorts of progressive organizations and candidates. And there is more than one person whom she supported financially during a hard time. But even more important was her emotional generosity. She listened to you, and then she told you what to do. Or sometimes she told you what to do and then listened! She was a great giver of advice, and a lot of it was pretty good. Because she saw you. She knew you. She praised you at every opportunity—to your face, to anyone within earshot. She shared her opinions and ideas—and she wanted to hear yours, even when you disagreed with her—or maybe especially then. She kept no lid on her feelings. She laughed out loud. She blew up at you and then let it blow away. She put on a record and grabbed your hand and pulled you into a dance. She told you she loved you, always.

After Urv died, a friend—someone I'd met through Urvashi, of course; she was always bringing people together—said to me, "This must be so hard for you, since you were part of Urv's inner circle." And she was right, it is hard. And then she said, "But, *everyone* was part of Urv's inner circle." That too.

Which brings us to this book.

Amy and Jyotsna had been introduced to each other by Urvashi but we had never worked together. The idea to put together a collection of Urvashi's writings came to us independently around the same time. Within weeks after Urvashi's passing, Jyotsna had begun to informally archive Urvashi's writings for posterity. Urvashi's life-partner Kate Clinton had generously given Jyotsna access to Urvashi's electronic files, which contained a near complete record of her talks and writings. It became clear to us that Urvashi's powerful and prescient writings, some of which had previously only appeared in specialized outlets, deserved a wider readership. With Kate's support and the encouragement of Urvashi's close friends, Susan Allee and Richard Burns, and her former editor, Charles Flowers, Jyotsna and Amy decided to team up on this project, bringing to it our different perspectives, networks, and experiences, but also a shared commitment to keeping Urvashi's voice alive. It has turned out to be a wonderful partnership. The project has been both meaningful and comforting.

Perhaps it is fitting that this first book after her passing has a personal genesis; we know of no one who better embodied the feminist maxim that the personal is political than Urvashi. Urvashi brought out the best in others, inspiring them to act with courage. Her generosity to causes and individuals, her unease with money and marriage as property, all came together as a commitment to showing up, being present. Seeing firsthand how the government and families of origin failed to show up for LGBTQ people dying of AIDS led her to see that there was an inseparable connection between personal and political action. Navigating simultaneously between contradictory worlds, wealth and poverty, Indian and American cultural expectations, straight and queer, theory and practice, participating from her hospital room or her home in events that she could no longer attend in person, all sketch an outline of what Urvashi was like.

As relentlessly as Urvashi worked, and as much passion as she poured into her work, her activism was not the only important thing in her life. Her energy for relationship was boundless. She never failed to attend to the people in her life, to her much beloved Kate, above all.

The determination, persistence, and "realistic optimism" that Urvashi showed as she sought to build and sustain her "dream of a common movement" were qualities that she applied to her own struggle for survival in her final two years.

Conclusion

Urvashi Vaid was guided by a moral vision that gave her the strength to undertake the long and hard struggle to bring about social change. She persuasively argued for forging connections between seemingly disparate issues and groups in order to build strong movements. And she was clear-eyed that this work is difficult and that longevity—of a movement or of a life—is by no means guaranteed and cannot be taken for granted. She understood that hard-fought legal gains can be taken away—as, for example, in the US Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision, which overturned settled law on reproductive rights. As a veteran activist, she also understood that setbacks and derailments are part of the process and that, rather than feel defeated, we must "keep our eyes on the prize," in the words of the civil rights movement's freedom song, and look to each other for support, pick up the pieces, and build anew. Her writings are a living legacy, a reminder that the work continues.

The Hebrew poet and World War II martyr Hannah Senesh wrote, "There are stars whose radiance is visible on earth even though they themselves have

disintegrated. And there are people whose memory continues to light the world after they have passed from it. These lights shine brightest in the darkest night. They light the path for us."

We are again living through the darkest of nights, and Urvashi explains cogently and in great detail in her writings what makes this night so dark. Antidemocratic forces are becoming bolder, seizing power, marauding over the earth. Still, she finds light and hope—in our human capacities for love and for creativity, in our determination to bend that proverbial arc, hanging onto it with everything we've got, to keep it pointing the way toward justice. Let us hold onto that light and that hope.

NOTES

Foreword

Epigraph 1. Urvashi Vaid, "Race, Power, Sex, Citizenship, and the LGBT Movement," 2008,

xiv BERTOLT BRECHT "And I Always Thought," *From Bertolt Brecht Poems 1913–1956*, edited by John Willet and Ralph Manheim with the cooperation of Erich Fried. London: Methuen, 1979.

Introduction

1 CATAPULTED URVASHI VAID ONTO THE NATIONAL STAGE Shortly after the incident, on April 10, 1990, the NGLTF issued a press release in the form of an editorial by Geni Cowan and John D'Emilio, then cochairs of the task force's board of directors, titled, "Mr. President, May We Have Your Attention? Why Urvashi Vaid Stood Up to Speak to George Bush." A copy of the press release is available here: https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc916378/.

2 LAUNCHING SEVERAL IMPORTANT INITIATIVES AND NETWORKS See "Urvashi Vaid's Extraordinary Legacy at Justice Work," *JusticeWork*, June 2023. https://lgbtqwomensurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Resource_Urvashi-Vaids-Extraordinary-Legacy-at-Justice-Work.pdf.

2 "MOST PROLIFIC" ORGANIZER IN THE LGBTQ MOVEMENT'S HISTORY See Masha Gessen, "The Prolific Activism of Urvashi Vaid," *New Yorker*, May 24, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/news/postscript/the-prolific-activism-of-urvashi-vaid.

3 CRITICALLY IMPORTANT ROLE AT A CRITICALLY IMPORTANT HISTORIC MOMENT John D'Emilio, "A Leader in the Fight for Social Justice: Lessons from the Career of Urvashi Vaid," October 2023, Social Movements and the Politics of Law—A Symposium in Honor of Urvashi Vaid, Center for Civil Rights and Social Justice, Emory University School of Law.

3 "ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE, AND CONNECT, CONNECT, CONNECT." D'Emilio, "A Leader in the Fight for Social Justice: Lessons from the Career of Urvashi Vaid."

3 CREATING CHANGE CONFERENCE At the 2022 Creating Change Conference, Urvashi was awarded the Susan J. Hyde Award for Longevity in the Movement. In introducing Urvashi and her impact on the movement, Sue Hyde recounted how they cofounded Creating Change in 1987. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rj7xnzNtnfo.

3 MILLIONS MORE HAVE VIEWED AND HEARD THE LIVE VIDEO For a video clip of the 1993 remarks by Urvashi Vaid, see https://www.c-span.org/video/?c5040679/user-clip-urvashi-vaid-speech-1993-march-washington-lesbian-gay-bi-equal-rights-liberation.

4 THINGS TO DO "There Are Things to Do" was the title of the concluding chapter of *Virtual Equality*.

5 MAXIMIZING THE LIFE-CHANCES, FREEDOM, AND SELF-DETERMINATION OF ALL LGBT PEOPLE Urvashi Vaid. *Irresistible Revolution: Confronting Race, Class and the Assumptions of LGBT Politics* (2012, Magnus Books), xi.

6 BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROGRESSIVE, FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS Urvashi received the Auburn Seminary's 2021 Lives of Commitment Award Celebrating Women of Moral Courage. The award citation noted that "[her] decades of investment in, and cultivation of, people of faith working on behalf of LGBTQ justice is instrumental in shaping so much of how we understand social justice, activism, and advocacy."

8 LATER INTERVIEWS Urvashi Vaid. "Dreaming in Color Podcast," Episode 2, 43 min. Interview with Urvashi Vaid in early 2022 by Darren Isom, June 23, 2022. https://bridgespan.org/dreaming-in-color-urvashi-vaid/.

10 ONE OF URVASHI'S MOST IMPORTANT AND NUANCED ESSAYS "What Can Brown Do for You?" was published in Urvashi Vaid's *Irresistible Revolution* (2012) and has been reprinted in a 2023 compilation of Kessler talks from 2022 to 2020, titled *Queer Then and Now*, edited by Debanuj Dasgupta, Joseph Donica, and Margot Weiss (New York: Feminist Press).

14 URVASHI WAS ALL IN For a video recording of remarks by Urvashi's nibling, Alok, at the memorial celebration held for her in New York City, November 3, 2022, see https://americanlgbtqmuseum.org/2022/08/memorial-to-urvashi-vaid/.

16 "REALISTIC OPTIMISM" "Realistic optimism" was a phrase that Urvashi began using toward the end of her life, to describe her own struggle to survive.

16 BUILD ANEW "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" was a folk song that became influential during the American civil rights movement. For a 1963 rendition by Pete Seeger, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdJhoF_vYs8.

17 THEY LIGHT THE PATH FOR US There are many translations from the Hebrew of this poem. One, titled "Stars Up Above," can be found at "Sermons," https://www.centralsynagogue.org/worship/sermons/stars-up-above.