

2018

# Lesbian Librarianship for All: A Manifesto

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## Recommended Citation

Smith-Cruz, S. (2018). Lesbian Librarianship for All: A Manifesto. In K. Adler, I. Beilin, & E. Tewell (Eds.), *Reference librarianship and justice* (pp. 293–306). Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press.

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# Lesbian Librarianship for All: A Manifesto

*Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz*

## Coming Out with the L-Word

In March 2015, I gave a talk at Pratt Institute School of Information and Library Science at a student-led event called Feminism in Libraries. Although I felt internal pressure for my lack of direct identification as a feminist, I reassured myself that feminism as a topic to be explored, and not as an identity, was what I could contribute to the panel. The concept for “Lesbian Librarianship for All” was derived from that mantra I walked with while giving the talk. Suffering from the internal dialog as to whether or not I ought to “come out” as “not a feminist,” I developed a coping mechanism that was in direct response to any assumption of nomenclature as central. Seven months later, to my surprise, Pratt’s *School of Information and Library Science* changed its name to *Pratt School of Information*, relinquishing itself of what seemed to be a weight or burden of the L-Word. This shift felt strangely connected to other parts of my life, where I am asked to participate because of my identity. In the Pratt talk I developed a malleable concept of being a Lesbian Librarian, one that can be extended to include all librarians, regardless of sexual orientation. One can “be a lesbian librarian” without needing to actually be a lesbian. I began to walk with this concept, wondering if all lesbians could be librarians for their

communities, without actually having the MLS. Determining if this were possible, connecting these L-words, “lesbian” with “librarian,” was something that required further exploration.

To indulge this inquiry, I asked myself two questions: what does it mean to be a lesbian? And, what does it mean to be a librarian? How do the two overlap and intersect, and how might they meet in marginality, struggle, and implication for silence. Do both require an active movement toward justice? At the time of the writing of this essay, lesbian identity is synonymous to many in the queer community as outdated, regressive, and trans-misogynistic.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, shifts in the word “library” to the library profession, or the role of librarians in academic environments, has made many professionals shy of the word, needing often to “come out” as library affiliates when among other faculty colleagues.

This essay intends to bridge the gap between two under-appreciated communities by committing to ways that each enhances the other. The complications for being a lesbian librarian outlined here may be applied to any librarian or any lesbian, with a goal to supersede the prevalence of waning value to our communities. I intend for this chapter to act as a type of manifesto: the ever-puzzling autobiographical manifesto, coupled with an invitation for others to stake a claim as lesbian librarian. Referencing lesbian writer Cherríe Moraga’s autobiographical narrative, scholar Sidonie Smith critiques a function of the autobiographical manifesto as a form which may result in a transformation of knowledge from the public performance of marginal perspectives. “To bring things ‘into the light of day,’ to make manifest a perspective on identity and experience, affects an epistemological breakage in repetition: it asserts the legitimacy of a new or alternative ‘knowledge’ located in the experience of the margins.”<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 Bonnie J Morris, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture* (NY: SUNY Press, 2017). I co-presented with Bonnie Morris and others at an historic conference celebrating 40 years since the publication of Jonathan Ned Katz’s *Gay American history: lesbians and gay men in the U.S.A.: a documentary history*. The single panel on lesbian identity was riddled with this concern and ended quite tragically. Morris presented findings on her 2017 publication for which I think is apt to summarize with this citation, especially since she has been barred and uninvited to present on the book since its publication, out of community fears of transphobic material, despite its focus of lesbian erasure, the book then, being evidence to its title.
  - 2 Sidonie Smith, “The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities, Politics,” *Prose Studies* 14, no. 2 (1991): 191.

To bring into the light of day this alternative knowledge, I find it helpful to use a simple analogy, beginning with what I assume the readers of this collection to be the most familiar:

*Librarian is to \_\_\_\_\_ as Lesbian is to \_\_\_\_\_.*

Let us begin.

### Marginality in Librarianship

Chattel slavery was enforced in the United States until 1865. It should then be no surprise to any migrant or immigrant or descendant of slaves that our encroachment on indigenous land is inconsistent with human rights, mutual respect, and justice. In a nation built on blood, upholding this capitalist structure is the primary function of any institution. As a result, the promotion of institutional practices that honor a vision of social justice has, at best, an inherent contradiction. Public Services librarians grapple with this capitalist-focused/justice-seeking contradiction at the very core of our points of service: The aim to uphold national values, through referencing the canon, promoting academic publishers, assisting teaching faculty, assigning access policies, and other practices, reify a systemic flaw of our profession in an attainment for justice.

To remedy implications of capitalist collusion, librarians must locate themselves as simultaneously marginal as well as in positions of power, first, before the ability to effect change is enacted. Although tribalistic, association of oneself as a librarian-as-identity, may implicate a possible world where librarians are at the center, thereby standing between a spectrum of two opposing forces of power. In the case of some academic librarians, for example, the constant struggle to secure tenure is often at odds with both recognition as faculty by colleagues of neighboring departments, and the daily requirements of service work for which library colleagues are equally measured. If centered, the librarian may see herself holding power over her patrons on one end, and yet, beneath faculty and colleagues on the other. This centering may equate a feeling of marginalization when focused in the capitalist, hierarchy-driven ethos of our institutions. Scholar Lisa Sloniowski details this struggle by stating, “there is a ceiling for care

workers in the university because we are viewed not as professionals or scholars, but as support and administrative workers.”<sup>3</sup> She goes on to say,

We struggle to find time to research and write because our service work is considered more useful to the corporate goals of the university, and university administrators are often unsupportive of our research goals when they take our limited time and bodies away from serving library users and their various anxieties. Simultaneously, the rise of digital humanities has opened doors for librarians and programmers to be more involved in academic projects, but nonetheless such projects are generally managed and funded within traditional academic-labor hierarchies, with professors directing the work of librarians and other alt-academics whose intellectual contributions are devalued as merely service work or project management.<sup>4</sup>

Measuring struggle is a route toward locating an “ongoing invisibilization,” or, if in the context of manifesto, identifying marginality within the librarian profession for academic librarians.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of 2015, during a large-scale campaign to demand faculty of color be targeted as potential employees at the Graduate Center (City University of New York), a list of demands was presented to the University President and the Provost office. A comprehensive overview of the numbers of appointed faculty of color listed a paltry handful of women appointed by the University Provost, demanding more. Of course I was pressed to sign the letter until I saw that my own name was not counted. Immediately, I contacted the committee alerting them of the good fortune that indeed another female faculty of color was on the core faculty line, at the University, inside the library, and that person was me! It was a pleasure to greet them, yet again, as their faculty library liaison. The response was thoughtful despite its flaw. The committee representative thanked me for my attention, but explained they would not add my name:

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3 Lisa Sloniowski, “Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian,” *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (September 13, 2016): 645–66, doi:10.1353/lib.2016.0013.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

Also, as to identifying central line faculty in particular, as I understand it, the idea was to try to throw into relief by focusing specifically on the GC as a college, and speaking as a college, the white maleness of the building. It'd be great if other cohorts would organize to speak to these matters as well.<sup>6</sup>

It is a difficult feeling to recall the impact that erasure brings when it is directed by those advocating for your existence. Despite my campus committee service, or assigned research leave time to write essays such as this one, or ultimately, despite the faculty appointment letter signed by both the Provost and President sitting in a file folder, in a cabinet beneath three shelves lined with layers of thank you cards from students and colleagues, I continued to support the efforts of female faculty of color, while cradling myself with resolve in my positioning as a *sister outsider*. From this position I understood that this fight wasn't about me, the faculty librarian; it was about the destruction of white maleness in the building among faculty "in the college." The skewed nature of the target, as so often occurs in social justice initiatives that push for diversity, has a flaw of dismissing the very people it aims to claim allegiance and advocacy.

I've found refuge in marginal positions as a librarian in librarian of color writers like April Hathcock, or lesbian of color faculty like Sara Ahmed. One notable instance I recall is from Sara Ahmed's blog, *Feminist Killjoy*, where she used her posts to document the development of her 2017 publication, *Living a Lesbian Life*. She posted the transcript of her Keynote of the 2015 Lesbian Lives conference. Ahmed, although not a librarian, made an interesting comparison to diversity work and lesbian life, which I found to be very librarian, in its focus on data.

Living a lesbian life is data collection; we collect information about the institutions that govern the reproduction of life: it is almost too much data; we don't have time to interpret all the material we collect. If living a lesbian life generates data, then lesbian feminism provides the tools to help us interpret that data.

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6 From email correspondence of the author. Clarification on how the perception of the library as not a part of "the college" was never sought, however the assumption is a distinction between the Graduate School and the University Center, holding administrative offices and departments as not a part of the college-proper.

And by data I am referring to walls. I first began thinking about walls when completing a research project on racism and diversity within institutions. Diversity practitioners would talk of how the very institutions that appointed them would block their efforts... And what I learnt from doing this research was that unless you came up against the walls, they did not appear...<sup>7</sup>

Social justice work, at its essence, is not meant to act only in the service of the marginalized or those silenced into corners of exclusion, but to ensure that all people “come up against the walls.” This can happen, I believe, when analogous manifestos such as this one are claimed by those who wouldn’t ordinarily implicate their connections to other groups. Communal exchange through ownership is one idealized goal that this manifesto aims toward.

The continual dilemma of librarians as faculty is one that inhibits equal participation in the academy as well as compromises scholarly output outside of the academy. Librarians are marginal as a result of our enduring values, which are at times at odds with our dual administrative and faculty positions. This positioning is similar to lesbianism and its position in a larger community of peers for which their significance is measured and at times challenged.

Or simply put: *Librarian is to* Faculty *as Lesbian is to* \_\_\_\_\_ .

### Marginality in Lesbianism

In Summer 2016, I was asked to deliver a keynote to an international LGBTQ conference on archiving, librarianship, museums, and special libraries (LGBTQ ALMS). At this conference my talk on black lesbian community organizing in New York City in the 1970s and early 80s led to audience questions solely about the inclusion of trans-women, most of which was irrelevant to the talk on specific lesbian women of the aforementioned time. I was unprepared to answer questions unrelated to the talk, and

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7 Sara Ahmed, “Living a Lesbian Life,” *Feministkilljoys*, February 26, 2015, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/02/26/living-a-lesbian-life/>.

wondered why similar questions weren't presented to other speakers whose work focused mainly on gay men.

Later that year, I was asked to participate in a documentary on lesbian identity as a result of my role as co-editor of a special issue of *Sinister Wisdom, a Multicultural Lesbian Literary and Art Journal* on Celebrating the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival—a forty-year-old annual festival for “women-born-women,” a claim newly established and also the reason for its ending. The festival was an iconic space worthy of an entire journal issue, as it touched the lives of thousands of women internationally, many of whom identified as lesbian. I was contacted as co-editor to present a historical timeline of lesbian identity, similar to my Keynote, but to focus on Michfest, as opposed to black lesbian organizing. Similar to other requests I've had throughout the years due to my affiliation with the Lesbian Herstory Archives and likely my role as lesbian librarian of color, fulfilling in these instances the mix of representation and professional legitimacy, I responded to these inquiries as a faculty reference librarian would.

This interview stood out to me as an example of lesbian librarianship because the interviewee, MJ Corey, was a young lesbian who expressed concern for the recurring and gripping fear that she experiences, when coming out as lesbian in a queer world. This fear led to none other than silence—a burden that she carried as an out and proud lesbian, not within mainstream straight communities, but when among the queer world. Although the connections of her story to the attendees and lovers of *Michfest* were apparent, I couldn't help but to equate her silence among other queers with the silence that I felt as a librarian among other faculty.

So to complete the analogy:

Librarian is to Faculty as Lesbian is to Queer .

Spring and Fall 1977 featured publication of the first issues of *Sinister Wisdom: a Journal of Words and Pictures for the Lesbian Imagination in All Women*, now titled, *Sinister Wisdom, A Multicultural Lesbian Literary and Art Journal*. Now one of the longest-running lesbian cultural, art, and literary publications, its very existence and archive cites a pronounced definition for the concept, term, and cultural underpinnings of the word “lesbian.” The cover of the third issue features a print by lesbian photographer, Tee Corrine. The cover frames a two-toned photographic-negative of a couple tussling in bed: one reclining nude is played like a guitar in the arms

of her lover. One arm clutches a neck to meet lips; the other arm, an arrow between open thighs. The entirety of a hand disappears into a contoured darkness. Wisps of layered cropped hair dance at the lightest sections of the horizontal negative exposure. I claim this Tee Corrine print and its 1977 *Sinister Wisdom* debut as cover image, known to be of two differently-abled women, as a timestamp of lesbian culture, representing a quest for visibility.<sup>8</sup> This same issue features an article by poet Adrienne Rich titled, “It is the lesbian in us... .” Rich writes, “The word ‘lesbian’ must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence, the closet-game, the creation of the *unspeakable*.”<sup>9</sup> Both Corrine’s photographic print, highlighting differently abled bodies, and Rich’s essay on language, speak to a modern-day divisiveness that exists within the queer community, where politics of gender-identities challenges any claim to the term “lesbian.” In a world where gender is a variable that must remain fluid, sexual identities that are perceived to rely on the stability of gender have implications of transphobia or gender-essentialism. This challenging concept of lesbian-centered culture and identity as antiquated has silenced dykes who manifest claims to lesbian-centered identities.

After the interview with the young lesbian documentarian, I put on my librarian hat and sent her links to the very first issues of *Sinister Wisdom* where she could source originations of lesbian political consciousness—one in particular is described by Harriet Desmoines in the first issue of *Sinister Wisdom*. In a piece titled, “Who-o-o-o is a Lesbian?” Desmoines states, “everytime a woman draws a circle around her psyche, saying ‘this is a room of *my own*’ and then writes from within that ‘room,’ she is inhabiting a lesbian consciousness.”<sup>10</sup> In Desmoines’ interpretation of consciousness, I attest that this room can be an ephemeral space, a library space, a writer’s space, a researcher’s space, or any conceptual space where a self-affirming idea may be transformed into action.

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8 Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz, “Graphic Activism: Lesbian Archival Library Display,” in *Gender Issues and the Library: Case Studies of Innovative Programs and Resources*, ed. Carol Smallwood and Lura Sanborn (McFarland, 2017). A similar description of the Tee Corrine print is also included in the Graphic Activism book chapter to reference the Lesbian Herstory Archives display at the CUNY Graduate Center. The iconic *Sinister Wisdom* cover is highlighted in this book chapter as well as in a *Sinister Wisdom* post-card series to celebrate an upcoming fifty years.

9 Adrienne Rich, “It Is the Lesbian in Us... .,” *Sinister Wisdom* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 6–9.

10 Harriet Desmoines and Catherine Nicholson, *Sinister Wisdom*, vol. 1, 1977.

## The Convergence: The Lesbian Librarian

For ultimate clarity in this comparison, “Librarian is to Faculty as Lesbian is to Queer” for the purpose of this manifesto, it is the case that librarians are faculty just as lesbians are queer. Although there are librarians who within the capitalist structure, supply reference work, conduct research, provide technical services, and contribute to scholarly communication, but are not faculty, there are also lesbians who live their lives as women who love other women but are not, and choose to not identify with the reclaimed term “queer.” Despite the existence of these multiple groups, in order to rely on the convergence ahead, let’s remain focused on the communities where all things are true: Lesbians who are Queer and Librarians who are Faculty. Once we are clear in this instance, the remainder of this chapter will denote, even further, that one need only be a lesbian or a librarian to be a lesbian librarian.

## Nomenclature in Lesbianism and Librarianship

The two identities shall meet with reference service as the adhesive. The term “lesbian” does not only describe a sexual orientation; lesbian is also a constructed political identity. As a result of a current political climate in which gender fluidity has precedence over gender essentialism, choosing lesbian identity is, similar to as it had been during the birth of the radical lesbian feminist movement, beyond sexual behavior.<sup>11</sup> During its beginnings, women who did not have sex with women identified as lesbian to prove their allegiance to ending patriarchy, by withholding access of their bodies from men. Over time, a lesbian identity was applied to anyone who choose to define herself as such, the necessary factors including, but not limited to, identification as a woman who also loves other women.

The American Library Association’s Committee on Accreditation (COA) adopted the Standards for Accreditation in 1972.<sup>12</sup> However, iden-

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11 This refers to terms such as “old gay” and “new gay” which distinguished between women who were out pre and post the radical women’s movement. Some new gays were considered non-sexual lesbians who identified with a political affiliation, with the premise that patriarchy could only be ended by absolute exclusion from men.

12 William R. Eshelman, “The Erosion of Library Education,” *Library Journal* 108, no. 13 (1983): 1309.

tification as a librarian predates accreditation of a master's degree in library and information studies, the current standard. In addition, similar to the 2015 name change by Pratt University from *School of Information and Library Science* to *School of Information*, of the sixty schools listed under the ALA database of accredited programs, twelve, or 20%, of programs do not have the name "library" in their granted degree.<sup>13</sup> The degree names listed below have the number of institutions who hold the degree, with no library-titled degree alternative, in parenthesis:

- Master of Science (5)
- Master of Information Studies (2)
- Master of Science in Information (1)
- Master of Science in Information Science (1)
- Master of Information Studies (1)
- Master of Science in Information Studies (1)
- Master of Information (1)

Furthermore, like Pratt Institute, schools that do supply degrees with "library" in the name of the degree granted are close to 50% less likely to have "library" in the name of the school. Twenty-seven out of sixty, or 45%, of schools accredited by the COA do not have "library" in the name of the school or department.<sup>14</sup>

Variation in the use of the word "library" in library school programs, departments, degrees (and although not discussed here, also position titles), make clear that the word "library" is a disappearing indicator for identifying librarians. "The word library is important—or should be..." but is increasingly removed from the mouths of practitioners in the name of legitimacy and innovation.<sup>15</sup>

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13 Pratt Institute School of Information actually does supply a Master of Science in Library and Information Science.

14 American Library Association and Committee on Accreditation, "Directory of Institutions Offering ALA-Accredited Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies," Database, (April 26, 2017), [www.ala.org/accreditation](http://www.ala.org/accreditation).

15 Connie Van Fleet and Danny P. Wallace, "The I-Word: Semantics and Substance in Library and Information Studies Education," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 104–9.

## Being a Lesbian Librarian

Now that we've got naming out of the way, understand that naming oneself a lesbian or a librarian will be contested by those who have remained loyal to the title(s) and hold the "authority" to name themselves as such: Lesbians who actually have relationships with women will grow confused if non-lesbians begin to adopt the title; similarly, librarians will often test others with a talk of library school, to ensure to rid the room of any imposters.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, these methods may be applied in the following instances with the clear understanding that one does not have to be attracted to women or have an MLS to be a "lesbian librarian."

### Lesbian Librarianship for Librarians

- If living life as a man, then your affiliation as a lesbian librarian may be akin to subject specialty, as would be the case for a white-bodied person to be the Africana Librarian or an abled-bodied person to the Disabilities Librarian. It is extremely important to question your reasons for wanting to be a lesbian librarian and be prepared to describe these reasons when asked.
- If living life as a woman, but not a lesbian, then your affiliation may be the same as a lesbian studies subject specialty, but it would be extremely important to consider every moment when you experience the need to "come out" as "not a lesbian" by sexual orientation, and the heterocentric predisposition of these needs.

### Lesbian Librarianship for Lesbians

- If without an MLS or its equivalent, then respond to inquiries on lesbianism as a librarian would, using reference style communication, sourcing references, and providing community assistance.
- If with an MLS, or its equivalent (or plainly put, Lesbian Librarianship For Lesbian Librarians)—this is not enough. A lesbian with an MLS must also be equipped with the same material as non-lesbian MLS holders in regard to lesbian history, political analysis, literature, archival material, and other aspects of lesbian studies.

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<sup>16</sup> Maia Ramnath, "Authority," ed. Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Connor, and A. K. Thompson, *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, 2016.

## Expectations of a Lesbian Librarian

If we are to use my career trajectory as an example, my undergraduate degree in Queer Women's Studies led me to work with leading institutions in NYC, namely, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies. I also had hands-on experiential work with non-profits, various academic institutions, women's studies departments and youth organizations throughout New York. However, my access to on-the-ground lesbianism was due to my being an actual lesbian. Prior to college, I co-founded a non-profit that employed young women living in the street economies, *Sister Outsider*, and was also a co-founding member of FIERCE, an LGBT youth activist organization. The goal in my listing community affiliations is to allow for non-lesbians to understand the possibility of a life of community affiliations. In the case where my upbringing is atypical, say in the instance of non-activist-affiliated lesbians living outside of city-centers, the ways to make up for lack of community access and experience is to use reference resources.

Harboring the knowledge of lesbian feminism, lesbian separatism, and lesbian herstory in general are the tools required to supply adequate lesbian librarianship and is far more impacting than exhibiting traits of same-sex-female sexual attraction. Ultimately, all lesbians, by sexual orientation alone, may not be equipped to be librarians with a lesbian subject specialty, or "lesbian librarians," even if she holds an MLS.

## Referencing Lesbians

To equip both lesbians and librarians with the tools to adequately supply lesbian reference service, I recommend enrollment in professional development courses at local institutions where lesbian herstory is taught from a community perspective. One such example of this is in New York City at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), the oldest and largest volunteer-run lesbian archive in the world. *Lesbian Lives* is the course that is the programmatic center of the Lesbian Lives Institute at LHA. Founded in 2013 by art historian, Flavia Rando, PhD., Lesbian Lives utilizes archival collections to apply an historical framework to archival materials for researchers, lesbians, and other community members with interest in LHA collections in particular, and lesbian herstory in general. Offered as a ten-week course on-site at the herstoric limestone building in Park Slope, Brooklyn,

this course allows for hands-on implementation of personal projects into its curriculum.

A lesbian librarian approach to reference aims to quote, cite, and refer other lesbians when responding to research questions. This includes the necessary application of language for identities synonymous to lesbian throughout time and location: dyke, bull-dagger, queer, same-gender-loving, afrekete, masculine-of-center, etc. Use of LGBTQ databases and archival material will help to direct resources away from large generalities to specifications in lesbian communities. It is also important to keep in mind L-word erasure when sourcing LGBTQ materials—that the search will likely yield results that are not lesbian, unless lesbian is specifically sought.

Lastly, since lesbian is a political identity, it is apt to end this manifesto by referencing lesbian librarian, Audre Lorde. As described in the preceding chapter, referencing Audre Lorde may mean to connect with our patrons, faculty colleagues, and community members in ways that allow for acknowledgement, mutual stretching, and resource sharing. To become a lesbian librarian, one must constantly hold internal awareness of our own societal positions in regard to class, race, sexual orientation, gender, age, religion, and physical ability in respect to the demographic breakdown of those who utilize the library, including the faculty, students, colleagues, and other public patrons. For me, I'd say: I am a salaried Assistant Professor, black/Hispanic, lesbian, woman (and assigned so at birth), mid-thirties, etc. As a result of my identities, I am singled out by students of color, placed on diversity committees, and chosen as representative for the library in outward facing programming. Acknowledgment of how many identities are reflected in this world, a world where librarians and lesbians are continuously silenced, is key to moving forward on a roadmap to justice.

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