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# Bridging the Silence: LGBT/Queer Asian/American Collegians and the Politics of Belonging on and off Campus, 1970s-1990s

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# Bridging the Silence: LGBT/Queer Asian/American Collegians and the Politics of Belonging on and off Campus, 1970s-1990s

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**Abstract**

**English Version**

The histories of LGBT/Queer and Asian/American student movements in U.S. higher education have largely been written separately, resulting in a shadowing of the history of queer Asian/American students' experiences. This paper addresses this missing history through a historiographical review of scholarly literature and published autobiographies from the 1970s to the 1990s. The analysis reveals several key patterns of experience for these students: (1) a double marginalization within both queer and Asian/American campus organizations; (2) a corresponding reliance on off-campus groups for a sense of belonging; (3) the strategic fragmentation of identity as a means of survival; and (4) the eventual emergence of dedicated queer Asian/American student groups in the 1990s, which faced their own internal tensions over purpose and identity. By bridging this historiographical silence, this study not only recovers unheard voices from the past but also offers critical insights for contemporary efforts to build genuinely inclusive university environments for students with intersecting identities.

**Japanese [日本語要旨] Version**

米国高等教育とその内部における学生運動における歴史研究は、LGBT／クィア学生と、アジア系アメリカ人学生とを別々に切り離して蓄積されてきた。このようなシングル・イシュー型の歴史記述は、LGBT／クィアのアジア系アメリカ人学生の存在を後景化する。本稿は、人種民族的構造とシス異性愛的規範の交差点に立つ、このような学生たちに係る1970-1990年代の「沈黙させられた歴史」に焦点を当てることで、交差的な歴史の掘り起こしに取り組む。本稿の分析からはLGBT／クィアのアジア系アメリカ人学生の歴史に関する4点の重要な知見が得られた。第一に、LGBT／クィア学生組織とアジア系アメリカ人学生組織の両方への障壁という二重の周縁化経験である。第二に、二重障壁を理由とした、学外組織への居場所の追求という経験である。第三に、生存戦略としてのアイデンティティの断片化というストラテジーである。第四に、1990年代の複合的アイデンティティに基づく学生組織登場と、その内部における目的やアイデンティティにまつわる緊張関係である。交差性のただなかに置かれた歴史記述の沈黙に橋をかけることで、本レビュー研究は、耳を傾けられてこなかった過去の声を聞くのみならず、現代の大学環境をインターセクショナルでインクルーシブなものにするための示唆を提供する。

**Key words**

Queer, Asian/American, History of Higher Education, Intersectionality, College Students

## Introduction

The history of student movements in U.S. higher education evolved in tandem with the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. Within this landscape, the history of LGBTQ+ student organizing and the history of identity-based activism by Asian/American students have each been established as distinct fields of study. However, these historical accounts have tended to center the experiences of white students or, in the case of Asian/American history, implicitly cisgender-heterosexual students. As a result, the experiences of "Queer Asian/American students," who exist at the intersection of these identities, have been doubly erased from the historical record.

This paper aims to illuminate this missing history. To do so, it undertakes a historiographical review of existing scholarship and autobiographical accounts by queer Asian/Americans to answer two central research questions: First, what were the organizational and personal experiences of queer Asian/American students on and off campus from the 1970s through the 1990s? Second, why has this specific history remained missing from dominant historical narratives to this day? To explore these questions, this paper employs intersectionality, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), as a critical lens to make visible the unique experiences born at the nexus of multiple oppressions, namely race and sexuality. Furthermore, drawing on queer theory, which is influenced by Michel Foucault (1978), it attempts to deconstruct normative historical narratives and recover marginalized voices

## Background

Higher education institutions, including universities and colleges, have served as a site for students' political engagement and voice for social betterment. Across the almost entire history of higher education in the U.S., college students have organized, gathered, discussed, and

worked to change their campus as well as society. One of such student groups is identity-based student organizations of the minoritized. With the history of the civil rights movement, students with "non-traditional" demographic features, including, though not limited to, female students, African American students, Chicano/a/x and Latino/a/x students, and LGBTQ+ students, have tackled inequality surrounding them on and off campus and created identity-based organizations for each.

LGBTQ+ student organizations have been a powerful catalyst for the off-campus social movements advocating for the rights of those who have been seen as "deviant" or "unethical" in terms of gender and sexual identities and behaviors. The history of such students, although many of them in the early phase often refer to themselves as somewhat exclusive terms such as "homosexual" or "gay and lesbian," has been delved into and talked about either in or out of academia. However, there remains a specific history relatively missing to have seldom been talked or heard in the history of LGBTQ+ college students. That is, Asian/American students engaged in such organizations.

According to Rivero (2022), previous literature in Asian/American studies has repeatedly critically indicated that Asian/American people in the U.S. are, regardless of their gender and sexual characteristics, stereotyped as being "castrated" and "desexualized" race. With such an understanding, more scholars have attempted to delve into the history of intimate relations and sexual behaviors of Asian/American migrants and diasporas; nonetheless, the history of LGBT/Queer Asian/American students in the U.S. higher education remains under the soil.

Thence, this paper explores the not-too-often-spoken-or-heard history of LGBT/Queer students; that is, the history of "queer Asian/American students in the U.S." by reviewing the literature on the histories of queer students, Asian/American students, and the intersection of

them. The following chapter explains the literature on the history of LGBTQ+ students' campus organizing in the U.S., mostly focused on students with "non-labeled racial identities," which is white (and in most cases, male) students. The third chapter explores the history of Asian/American students' campus organizing. The fourth chapter discusses the history of LGBTQ+ Asian/American people regardless of their higher education affiliation, which is followed by the brief conclusion of this work.

In this paper, the terms to refer to queer and trans community, such as LGBT, LGBTQ+, and queer, are used by reflecting each historical description and existing literature. To include all of these different terms, the paper uses the word "LGBT/Queer" when it is necessary. The term "Asian/American" is employed to express the postmodern understandings of the identity enactment of this racial group. As Palumbo-Liu (1999: 1) explains, "'Asian/American' marks both the distinction installed between 'Asian' and 'American' and a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement." When citing specific names of movements, groups, and events, the paper uses similar terms, such as Asian American, Asian-American, or Asian, depending on the documents.

## Methodology

This review paper employs a historical review method. Specifically, it involves two steps: first, critically examining the scholarly literature on the history of both LGBT/Queer student movements and Asian/American student movements in the U.S. to identify the gaps, namely, the absence of LGBT/Queer Asian/American students. Furthermore, as a preliminary step to fill this void, this paper analyzes published autobiographies, essays, and anthologies written by LGBT/Queer Asian/Americans. While not traditional archival documents, these narratives represent the most valuable available sources for tracing the personal experiences and emotions

that have fallen through the cracks of institutional records. The selection of these texts focused on those containing specific mentions of U.S. college life during the period from the 1970s to the 1990s.

## Historical Review

### *The history of LGBT/Queer students and campus organizing*

U.S. higher education was originally designed for white male upper-class able-bodied youth, and had not seen the diverse sexuality and gender identities as its constituents, though the non-heterosexual practices and crossdressing/non-cisgender expression existed in such an early era[1] and the collegians engaged in such acts were often purged from higher education institutions[2], until the 1960s. Inspired by the upward momentum of rights advocacy for civil rights and anti-war movements, universities and colleges began to serve as a site for political and social organizing for historically marginalized students, including LGBT/Queer students.

The U.S.-first student organization themed at non-normative sex and gender issues is the Student Homophile League (SHL) of Columbia University, established in 1966. A bisexual identifying sophomore student, Robert Martin, founded the organization, gaining support from Columbia and Barnard representatives, religious advisers, and two national leaders for gay/lesbian rights, Frank Kameny and Barbara Gittings (NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, n.d.). According to D'Emilio (1992), in the early stage of this organization, all of the students had to use pseudonyms, considering the hostile social setting at that moment. One thing putting

[1] Not only the lack of record, but also the erasure and ignorance of same-sex desire and passionate relationship were/are pervasive. Particularly, the romantic and erotic relationship between female figures are often overlooked as "friendship" rather than the history of "lesbianism." Look at Smith-Rosenberg (1975) and Oram & Turnbull (2001)
[2] During Cold War, not small number of people labeled as "homosexual" as well as conceived communists were purged. One of the most well known events is John Committee's investigation in Florida, which was described as "Florida's homophobic witch-hunts" by Schnur (1997: 156)

the organization in an arduous situation was that Columbia University and its Administration's Committee on Student Organizations (CSO) required all the student organizations to submit a member list to be approved as officially recognized organizations (Martin, 1992). One year after SHL had begun the activities, Robert Martin asked "the most prominent student leaders" to "become pro forma members." (1992: 259), and submitted the list, including Dotson Rader and John Ward, which made their history as the first recognized LGBT themed student organization in the U.S.

Contrary to the first assimilationist attitude of the Student Homophile League following the political stance of the Mattachine Society, the group made itself a more confrontational one in 1970, renaming the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), which reflected the militancy of the gay liberation and other racial activism on and off campus (Beemyn, 2003). At this time, other SHL came up at Cornell University and New York University, as well as the LGBT student organizing at Boston area colleges, Rutgers, and the University of Minnesota (Garves, 2012). Two students at the University of Minnesota, Stephan Ihrig and Koreen Phelps, with another undergraduate student member, Robert Halfhill, established a student political organization for gay and lesbian liberation as the Fight Repression of Erotic Expression (FREE) in 1969. Their first stance was political oriented and organized educational activities ("teaching misinformed straight about sexuality"), social activities ("dances, parties, happenings, [and] dinners"), and political activities ("petitions, peaceful demonstrations, [the] ACLU, Peace and Freedom Party, legislators, and the church") (Dilley, 2019: 15-19). Reichard (2024) mentioned in the book documenting the history of LGBT student organizations in California that the main activities of those student groups from the 1960s to the 1970s include discussion groups, dance events, and peer counseling. He found the meaning of social events, even dance events, in relation to the politicization of the student

organization; that is, those events functioned to raise awareness of the anti-gay activism and to create communities to collectively tackle such backlashes (Ibid., 2024).

Dilley (2019) summarizes the changes in the purpose and stance of LGBT campus organizing from the 1980s to the 1990s. In his investigation, the 1980s were the age when non-heterosexual students organized activism to call for "campus recognition, protection, and funding" (119). During the HIV/AIDS pandemic, students fought for funding for medical care and sexual health education, and protection from discrimination and physical threats. Inspired by the forms and strategies employed by ACT UP and Queer Nation, students in the 1980s enhanced their visibility through interactions in public spaces and acting more openly, which led them win the creation of non-discrimination statements and statutes on campus.

Coming to the 1990s, gay, lesbian, and increasingly bisexual students aimed to assimilate into campus. "An abject approbation turned into acquiesce, at least if the non-heterosexuals accepted the structures and values of the campus. In other words, if the non-heterosexual students accepted the minority role (which the campus might begrudgingly grant), even in how they thought of their personal identities, non-heterosexual students could, by the 1990s, engage in campus activities and cultural events. Non-heterosexual collegians could do so as long as they stressed how similar to heterosexuals they were, as long as they were not "too gay" in their self-identities or their campus activities, as long as they were not too outlandish in their affect or behavior" (Dilley 2019: 233). In this decade, the main political discussions were developed about the prohibition of non-heterosexual students from the military service and campus housing policies, which did not equate marriage with same-sex partnership. However, this established narrative of LGBT/Queer student organizing, implicitly centered on white student experiences,

begs the question: where were students of color, particularly Asian/American students, in this history?

***The history of Asian/American students***

The history of Asian/American students in higher education has been overlooked (Lee, 2010). To grasp the history of them in detail, it is vital to understand two big waves of immigration of Asian descendants to the U.S.: from the 1840s to the 1930s, and after 1965. Museus (2014) summarizes the milestone events of Asian/American immigration and the higher education-related events with huge impacts on the Asian/American community. According to him, in the first wave of the mass immigration from Asia to the U.S. were mostly labor immigrants who contributed to the development of American urban planning.

Despite their huge contribution, they were daily oppressed due to racial discrimination and economic exploitation, and specific ethnicities were discriminated in more explicit ways according to the political situations, such as “the Chinese Exclusion Act” in 1882 which is the first law banning ethnic-based immigration and the incarceration of Japanese/American in 1942 to 1945 for the racial antagonism towards Japanese American community after the Japanese military attacks Pearl Harbor. Approximately three months after the beginning of the mass internment, the director of War Relocation Authority (WRA), Milton Eisenhower, founded the Japanese American Student Relocation Council and moved around 4000 Japanese American students to college in West Coast. Those relocated to college had pressure to take responsibility to serve as “ambassadors of goodwill” who have a positive impact on society by gaining access to college education. Museus diagnoses that this might cause the emergence of the model minority myth of Japanese Americans in the U.S. higher education.

In 1965, the Immigration Act, which repealed the racially based immigration restriction, and the war in Southeast Asia, including the Vietnam War, led to a huge number of refugees from the Indochina area to the U.S., which is the second huge wave of Asian immigration. In the mid-1960s to 1970s, college students often organized political and social activism to fight for African American rights, women's rights, gay and lesbian rights, and to stop the Vietnam War. According to Nguyen & Gasman (2015), the Asian/American movement was tremendously inspired by the Black Power ideology. Contrary to the mutually isolated relations among the Asian/American community prior to World War Ⅱ, the pan-ethnic Asian/American community emerged in the 1960s due to the common language and common racial experiences as resources to build pan-Asian/American identity.

At the San Francisco State University, Chinese students founded the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA) in 1967, Filipino American students established the Philippine-American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE), and students at the UC Berkley built the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) in 1968. These three student organizations joined the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), which had been working on racial justice in 60s, and collaboratively acted to call for increasing Asian/American faculty and ethnic study programs reflecting the needs of the Asian/American community (Museus, 2014). The students at UCLA also founded Gibra, a local newspaper which disseminates the information on Asian/American movements mainly to college students to encourage them to join activism and vent out feelings and thoughts (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). On the one hand, students in this era attempted to dismantle the myth surrounding Asian/American, including the model minority discourse; however, on the other hand, some of them take advantage of their relatively privileged

racialization compared to Latino and African American students as an honorary white race (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Asian/American college students organized collective movements for the tenure battle of Dr. Don Nakanishi, who was denied promotion to tenured faculty because of his race at UCLA, and for the murder of Won-Joon Yoon killed by a White supremacist, Benjamin Smith (Museus, 2014). Interestingly, a survey conducted in 1992 about Asian-American students' perceived roles of ethnic-identity-based student organizations on campus shows that although they admitted the importance of such groups in ethnic identity development, many did not have time to join them and the tendency to be a member of those groups can be subject to their feeling of isolation on campus; the US-born students are more inclined not to join it than foreign-born students (Wang, Sedlacek, & Westbrook, 1992).

While Asian/American students forged a powerful political identity on campus, the historical literature rarely addresses the internal diversity within these movements, particularly concerning sexuality and gender identity. The following section will bridge this gap by exploring the specific experiences of students living at the intersection of these identities.

### *LGBT/Queer Asian/American students in the history of the U.S. higher education*

Amy Sueyoshi (2016a), a pioneering scholar of queer Asian American study indicated that the academe has hardly focused on the history of queer Asian Americans. Although she and other leading scholars have accumulated historical writings about those with the interlocking identities, the history of college students at the intersection has not been shed light on, whereas the research on their experiences in current higher education has been gradually accumulated (Masamitsu, 2023). In this section, I peruse the autobiographies, essays, and an anthology written by LGBT/Queer Asian/Americans, all of which are not limited to, but including the information

of their college life, and try to track their college lives and campus organizing from the 1970s to the 1990s.

In Kumashiro's (2004) edited book, *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian/Pacific American Activists*, documenting LGBT/Queer Asian/Americans' autobiographies, some people revealed their engagement in political and social organizing on and off campus. Nur-e-alam S. Chisty, who is from Bangladesh and was a student at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie at the time this book was edited, participated in both the Asian Students' Alliance (ASA) and the Queer Coalition. They write, "I remember sighing with relief when I learned that there were other queers of color in this world and that the term, 'Asian activist,' was not just another oxymoron!" (p. 11). Having said that, they also admitted the lack of a sense of belonging due to double barriers both in ASA and in Queer Coalition. They say, "While I enthusiastically devoted my energy to both, rarely did I feel my identities as a person of color and a queer person matter simultaneously." (p. 11). After they sought out queer-of-color organizations, they seemed to find the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association of New York (SALGA NYC) as one of the spaces for their identities to coexist. SALGA NYC is "a social, political and support group for queer and trans people who trace their descent from the South Asian region from the countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma (Myanmar), India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Tibet as well as people of South Asian descent from countries such as Guyana, Trinidad and Kenya" (SALGANYC, n.d.). This shows that there was no queer Asian student organization at the Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, and they needed to find their space to belong as a queer Asian/American outside the campus.

You Yun, a Chinese American activist, also joined the off-campus group "coming-out group" in 1994 and met the first Chinese lesbian in Minneapolis when she was a graduate

student. The two joined a group, PALs (Pacific Asian Lesbian and Bisexual Women Network), as well as "the first Midwest Asian lesbian and bisexual women's retreat in Minneapolis" in 1995. In an anthology by the Pacific/Asian Lesbians of Santa Cruz. California (Chung, Kim, & Lemeshewsky, 1987) "Between the Lines," a short essay by Japanese American lesbian college student – Akemi –, is contributed. Sharing her own experiences of suppressing her lesbian identity for the sake of Asian identity, she concluded her essay with hope for this growing group, "many of You could relate to my experience. That's the beauty of this new community. I find myself having to explain or teach people about myself and what it's like to be a minority within a minority. It gets very exhausting. With You I feel that the need to explain is gone. With You I can share my experiences. Whether You realize it or not, there is a connection or bond between us, and I plan to use it." (p. 18). Overall, The off-campus communities seemed to serve the queer Asian/American students as the space for belonging and social gathering to find the people who can share the experiences derived from the intersectional identities.

Another person in *Restoried Selves*, Roland Sintos Coloma, who was a doctoral Filipinx/American student at the Ohio State University, shared his participation in fraternity yearning for belonging and ironically having emotional and physical distance between and among men due to his sexuality/gender (Kumashiro, 2004). As to their identities, they write "I learned to clearly demarcate my interactions with straight male friends and classmates from my interactions with baklas. Lines were drawn, and my worlds separated. I even learned to lead separate home and school lives, a conscientious practice that carried over in the United States." (p. 23) and continued "Joining a fraternity and conforming my behavior, appearance, and language to the dominant majority were my strategies of straightening up and e-race-ing whatever made me different." (p. 24). Interestingly, their participation in "Greek life" let them

engage more in social justice oriented organizations on campus. They write reflecting back to the encounter with queer Asian American and Pacific Islander students through such organizations, “these Asian American and Pacific Islander queer and queer-positive radicals raised my critical consciousness; they represented a strong political voice articulating the concerns of Asian American and Pacific Islander students and other communities of color” and “it also profoundly shaped my racial and sexual identities” (p. 24-25). This shows that queer Asian American students did not necessarily organize the intersectional student groups, instead work on political and social issues through Greek system and other-issues-oriented student groups.

Kumashiro (2004) also shared his own journey in the graduate school, where he and his friend founded the group named “LGBT Asian and Asian Americans,” which was “a social and support group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer Asians and Asian Americans that meets monthly” (p. 68) Despite his original purpose, many participants have more interests in dating with White people and more social gathering, the group went into a confliction among the members, leading to many people’s left. This case shows that different people have different motivations to join the groups, which is not limited to political or social justice-oriented actions. Kumashiro submitted his doctoral dissertation in 1994 at Harvard University, so it is thought that he made the group in 1980s to 1990s. This shows There seemed to be no student organizations for such intersectional identities or any social groups even off-campus near the area, or if any, they seemed to operate low-ley.

The autobiographical accounts and essays examined, though fragmented, reveal several common patterns in the experiences of LGBT/Queer Asian/American students from the 1970s through the 1990s. First, many students experienced a "double marginalization", feeling that parts of their identity were ignored in both Asian student groups and LGBTQ+ student groups on

campus. As a second pattern, this often compelled them to seek a sense of belonging in off-campus communities, such as SALGA NYC or PALs, where their intersectional identities could be fully embraced. Third, as Roland's case illustrates, some adopted the "fragmentation" of their identity as a survival strategy to navigate normative university environments. Finally, while student groups specifically for LGBT/Queer Asian/Americans began to emerge in the 1990s, this nascent stage was also marked by internal diversity and tensions regarding the group's purpose (political versus social), as seen in Kumashiro's experience. These patterns demonstrate how LGBT/Queer Asian/American students navigated an institutional void to forge their own communities and identities.

As Sueyoshi (2016b) mentions, queer Asian American student groups started to be formed in the 1990s, such as Cal Q&A at UC Berkley and Q&A at Stanford University. The number of those groups is still limited and relatively new. At the University of Pennsylvania, the first queer and Asian student group, Penn Q&A, was founded in 2014. It is the time to start to see the beginning of the history of those campus organizing across the world. More archiving and historical researchers should be needed to track the new movements of LGBT/Queer Asian/American students' campus organizing.

Revisiting the findings through an explicit theoretical lens further clarifies the significance of these historical patterns. Drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, the experiences documented in this review cannot be understood as the simple accumulation of racial marginalization and sexual marginalization. Rather, LGBT/Queer Asian/American students encountered a qualitatively distinct form of exclusion produced at the intersection of racialized and heteronormative institutional structures. Their double marginalization within both Asian/American student organizations and LGBTQ+ student

organizations exemplifies how single-axis frameworks of identity-based organizing rendered intersectional subjects unintelligible within dominant campus narratives. The key themes identified in the literature and autobiographical accounts—double marginalization, reliance on off-campus communities, identity fragmentation as a survival strategy, and internal tensions within emerging organizations—can be read as historically situated responses to intersecting regimes of power. From a queer theoretical perspective, informed by Foucault (1978), these strategies illuminate how universities functioned as normative spaces that disciplined sexuality through both visibility and silence. The fragmentation of identity described by several narrators was not merely an individual choice, but a tactical negotiation with institutional expectations that demanded racial legibility and sexual respectability to remain separate.

## Conclusion

Graves (2012), argues that the history of queer in education was not welcomed in the college of education while reflecting back on her career in the 1990s and 2000s. Although the last two decades have seen more scholars working on queer history in (higher) education, the intersectional lenses seem to be often left out. Intersectionality lets researchers to look at the unseen and unheard histories which are not to be compensated with other voices as Crenshaw (1989) theorized as “the greater than the sum.” The first job for us as researchers is to ask ourselves, “What is missing?,” but this is not the goal of the exploration. The question which we should ask further is “why is it still missing?” The history of Asian/American students in the U.S. higher education has been marginalized and downplayed in the academe (Lee, 2010), and the same thing can be said for the history of queer people. In the time when the number of tenured-faculty is decreasing and more scholars with advanced degrees are working in an unstable work environment (Altbach, 1999), the structured epistemological injustice as to what

themes in scholarships are valued and what are not has been perpetuated. This paper attempted to come closer to the missing voices and memories about LGBT/Queer Asian/American students in the U.S. so that it can grapple with the injustice. The limitation is that this paper does not cover the historical materials, and instead focus on the literature. This point needs to be made up by the future research by analyzing the historical materials and archival data across the nation.

By explicitly situating these historical experiences within intersectionality and queer theory, this study demonstrates that the silencing of LGBT/Queer Asian/American collegians was not accidental, but structurally produced through the epistemological boundaries of both higher education institutions and academic historiography itself. Attending to these intersectional absences challenges us to reconsider how histories of student movements are written, whose experiences are rendered legible, and whose remain unheard.

Unearthing this history is not merely an act of correcting the historical record. The challenges these pioneers faced—navigating dual marginalization, identity fragmentation, and internal debates about their organizations' purpose—resonate with the experiences of queer students of color on campuses today. Listening to their unheard voices offers critical insights for contemporary universities striving to build genuinely inclusive environments.

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