

2017

Incomplete Utopianism: Homosexuality in The Dispossessed

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Recommended Citation

Adelante, Beck O. (2017) "Incomplete Utopianism: Homosexuality in The Dispossessed," *Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access/vol1/iss1/5>

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Abstract

This paper draws on research about queer theory and history to analyze, through a literary utopian lens, Ursula K. Le Guin's treatment of homosexuality in her novel *The Dispossessed*. The novel itself is said to be "an ambiguous utopia," a description that holds up in an analysis of the other various parts of the novel. When it comes to sexuality, however, Le Guin's discussion and writing on the topic is notably lacking. It is paid lip service through a brief showing of neutral attitude on the "anarchist" planet in the novel, but never given further analysis or a more complex viewing, despite ample opportunity to do so. Le Guin's absence of critical thought on queer theory exemplifies her own fallibility in terms of avoiding too easy paths in her creation of a complex and "ambiguous utopia." This is ultimately a reminder and warning that limitations of personal experience and perspective can influence anyone, and that we must all do our best to account for our blind spots.

Keywords: LGBTQ, Homosexuality, Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, Queer Theory

Incomplete Utopianism: Homosexuality in *The Dispossessed*

Literary utopianism takes a slightly different form than general utopian thinking. As Lyman Tower Sargent says, rather than functioning as social dreaming, a literary utopia serves as a critical or “distorted mirror,” reflecting a photographically negative image of the author’s society, while highlighting its flaws by having them fixed and nonexistent in the fictional utopia (Sargent 25). Ursula K. Le Guin takes an expanded approach to literary utopianism in her novel, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. As the title implies, the worlds that she presents within it are not clearly utopian or dystopian; neither is obviously better or worse than Le Guin’s society of 1970s America. Rather than a straightforward critical mirror, her societies function more like a house of mirrors. Le Guin approaches every societal ill or talking point she identifies from multiple angles, representing complex and layered perspectives on each issue within society. As Darren Jorgensen puts it, Le Guin was perhaps more focused on examining the realities of the timeline and aftermath of revolutions than she was establishing any kind of utopia (188), something supported by the novel’s title and Le Guin’s examination and representation of each topic. There are therefore no “good” or “bad” stances, no clear solutions, no obvious or biased commentary, because there was no utopia created, only utopian ideals. Her examination of America in the 1960s and 70s is thus nuanced and balanced in every way—except for one.

While Le Guin offers equal treatment to topics like long distance communication, careers and the job market, currency, economics, relationship dynamics, and gender politics on her two fictional planets of Anarres and Urras, discussion of homosexuality and non-heteronormative identities and experiences is relegated solely to a few passages that take place on Anarres, the self-identified “utopian anarchist” planet. There is truly only one critical mirror on this topic, and despite ample opportunity to explore and juxtapose every aspect of it and surrounding issues, Le

Guin remains curiously silent. The blasé attitude with which Anarresti society addresses nonheteronormative sexuality seems to be the only clear-cut position in the novel, from author directly to reader. That is, rather than exploring why or how sexuality has supposedly become a nonissue, Le Guin's own blasé attitude means that, like Anarresti culture, she simply does not discuss or analyze the politics of sexuality. While seemingly utopian in that it easily and cleanly removes a variety of social ills (sexual hang-ups, taboos, and homophobia), it perpetuates the same issues it aims to remove, as well as the idea that these uniquely queer experiences are somehow inherently separate from personal identity, social perspective, and subjectivity. Doing so also removes the multifaceted and crucial history of homosexuality and LGBTQ identities—the movements for which were in their prime and encroaching on the mainstream at this time—morphing it all into a meaningless and unacknowledged 'norm.' Even from Jorgensen's perspective, wherein these textual instances of homophobia and this lack of examination would perhaps intend to show that the cisheteropatriarchy persists after revolutions (189), the actual content is too flimsy and one-dimensional to possibly support the claim. With only a handful of direct references to homosexuality at all, an implicit dismissal of bisexuality, and a lack of nuanced and complex investigation into this topic, Le Guin fails to follow the ultimate message and goal of her own novel: to think complicatedly and critically, to consider all history and perspectives, and to thus strive for ever-changing solutions through utopian thinking, and the follow through and motivation that would sustain them long-term.

The earliest reference to non-heteronormative sexualities and the anarchist Anarresti attitudes towards them is in Chapter Two; the passage's tone and intent are telling. The main character, Shevek, is a teenager currently doing hard manual labor for a job posting in the middle of a desert. The nature of the job demands that he live with his coworkers in the middle of

nowhere, a typical occurrence with the way Anarres assigns jobs. While there, temporarily away from a few of his friends, he has an eye-opening sexual experience with a girl named Beshun who also works there. The introduction to the brief account of this experience tells us that Shevek “had had sexual experience freely with both boys and girls,” which is common for “all children of Anarres” (Le Guin 51). It is noted in passing, as part of a sentence that expounds the sexual prowess of Beshun, how much she “took [Shevek] into the heart of sexuality” (51). There is then an explanation of their brief relationship that is interrupted by their new job postings on opposite ends of the planet, and the realization that they did not have a lasting love. However, what precedes this passage about Beshun, including the line about Shevek’s previous sexual exploration with boys and girls, are implicit and explicit discussions of heterosexuality. Exactly ten pages earlier in the same chapter, a slightly younger Shevek is with three other boys, and together they “had [gone] up to the hilltop for masculine company” (41). The reason for this need, however, is because they felt “the presence of females was oppressive to them,” and thus “they had all tried copulating with girls; some in despair had also tried not copulating with girls. It made no difference” (41). One boy in the group with Shevek is Bedap, who is later revealed to be gay. The fact that, at 16 years old, Bedap was still copulating with girls—and apparently only girls, or alternatively, simply not copulating at all and thus “in despair”—is conspicuous (41). While the later passage about Shevek’s exploratory history with boys and girls makes it seem as though non-straight sexualities are completely accepted, Bedap’s denial of self and the author’s complete non-acknowledgement of his sexuality in this passage about the boys avoiding or having sex with the girls, makes it seem otherwise.

In addition, the way this paragraph is phrased makes it seem like the only two options these four boys had considered when it came to dealing with the presence of women was to

either have sex with them or not have sex with them. While that raises a few questions about implicit sexism and misogyny in both the individual and Anarresti culture (a discussion that Le Guin carries throughout the novel on both Anarres and Urras), it also implies an intrinsic heterosexuality or heteronormativity on Anarres, as these two are intertwined and negatively affect or influence the thinking of all the boys present, gay or straight (Somerville 190). Again, Bedap's sexuality is an acknowledged fact just a few chapters later, and yet here in this chapter, where the majority of world-building exposition of Anarres takes place—including a lengthy discussion about the Anarresti word for “have sex” versus “rape” and other synonyms—we never hear of him copulating or experimenting with his friends at this young age, beyond a brief mention of Bedap “[accepting] the homage of a younger boy who had a homosexual-idealistic crush on him” (55). This passage doesn't suggest much about Bedap's own preferences, as it also says Bedap was “never very energetic sexually,” which reads, ironically and simultaneously, as both a remark about the younger boy's advances being unwanted and potentially predatory, and a conscious decision to desexualize Bedap amidst the stereotypes of homosexuals being predators and abusers (Le Guin 55). Other than this half-admission, we have only an oblique reference to Shevek experimenting, as all Anarrestis purportedly do, with boys and girls throughout his adolescence (51). We never actually see this demonstrated in the same way we see heterosexual desire in the passage about the four boys dealing with the presence of women, or in the pages discussing the heterosexual (and purely sexual) relationship that happens later between Shevek and Beshun; comparatively, the relationship between Bedap and the boy gets one sentence, with nothing confirmed or explained. These brief passing mentions of homosexuality, especially in Chapter Two, where they serve to help construct the reader's first real impression of life on Anarres, are seemingly one-dimensional. Buried amidst the scenes on Anarres that build an

already complicated image of the planet and its society and origins, this stands out as minimal and simplistic. Shevek and his friends have several conversations about philosophy, math, ownership, Anarres versus Urras, and even gender politics. But alas, they never once discuss sexuality; every reference to it is non-specific and occurs briefly in narration rather than dialogue. In this way, sexuality as a topic—or homophobia as a social ill—is mistreated or maligned in this first chapter about Anarres. It doesn't fit with Le Guin's careful weaving of details and seeding of plot and ideas early on; rather, it is first treated like a clear-cut improvement, and then treated as inconsequentially as the fact that Anarrestis wear clothes or eat food. It is therefore not only unlike the rest of Le Guin's literary utopian critical thinking, but it is even unlike Sargent's critical mirror: It is not explored or discussed like other topics in the novel, nor is it explicitly made out to be better than the baseline state of homophobia in Le Guin's America. Mentioning homosexuality in this way therefore seems incomplete or inconsequential, as there is no discussion of the topic carried out within the novel itself.

Bedap returns significantly in Chapter Six, this time to begin questioning Shevek's thinking about Anarresti society and its relation to Urras, the larger (and mostly capitalist and oligarchic) planet from which all Anarresti people departed over 100 years ago. Bedap speaks radically and thoughtfully, providing some clear criticisms of the shortcomings of Anarres, despite its presenting itself as an anarchist utopia (therefore demonstrating Jorgensen's assertion that the novel is an examination of the failures of revolutions [189]). After spending an entire day talking with one another in the capital city of Abbenay on Anarres, Shevek and Bedap share a bed, awake the next day, and then “[discuss] whether or not they should pair for a while, as they had when they were adolescent. It had to be discussed because Shevek was...heterosexual and Bedap...homosexual...” (172). They end up sharing a domicile (lodgings assigned and

handled by Anarres' centralized system) for ten days, copulating an unspecified number of times, apparently instigated by Shevek "with considerable tenderness," because "the sexual element of [reaffirming their friendship] meant a great deal to Bedap" (172). An entire paragraph is dedicated to them this time, considerably more than the single sentence Bedap's sexuality received in Chapter Two, but the topic still appears to be less explicit and of less concern than heterosexual couples in the novel, like Shevek and Beshun, or Shevek and his later partner, Takver. This paragraph about Shevek and Bedap's sexual encounter also frames the temporary pairing as a kind of sacrifice that Shevek willingly makes to cement his renewed friendship with Bedap. In emphasizing that Shevek is definitely heterosexual, rather than allowing for the possibility that he may be bisexual or otherwise polysexual, the act is framed as a personal sacrifice, like taking one for the team, or in this case, for their friendship. Though Rob Latham says that this, in addition to Shevek's exploits in his youth, was an attempt at creating a bisexual character (590), the explicit statement of heterosexuality and the framing of his relationship with Bedap clearly undermine this possibility. Samuel Delany further points out that the bisexual experience is completely lacking in the construction and narrative of Shevek's character, something supported in this framing of Shevek's end of the deal (234-35). It is even specifically said that this temporary sexual relationship means more to Bedap than it does to Shevek, and that the sexual aspect is crucially important to Bedap, even though "there was no sexual desire on either side to make the connection last" (Le Guin 172). This simultaneously contradicts the statement in Chapter Two about how Bedap had very little sexual energy, and also paints him as an overly sexual or perverse person, thus almost leaning into the homophobic stereotypes about manipulative or predatory behaviors.

Following the idea that there was no actual sexual desire between the two, Shevek wonders in the very next paragraph why he even considers Bedap a friend, as his persistent criticism of Anarres drives Shevek mad. There is a complete lack of emotional significance, love, desire, or longevity to this example of homosexual copulation or relationship. What's more, this type of brief 'relationship' has apparently already happened once before "when they were adolescent," and yet there had been no previous mention of the two being with each other in any way beyond casual friendship (172). That example right there would have been a prime opportunity for Le Guin to not only set up her characters for their future interactions and deepen audience understanding of their relationship, but it would have also been an easy example to prove or demonstrate her world-building claim that Anarresti citizens nearly always sexually experiment with boys and girls in their adolescence. Instead, in terms of relationships or copulation, there were only references to both Shevek and Bedap copulating with girls, and once, for Bedap, with a boy—again out of pity or self-sacrifice. Additionally, despite the implication that Anarresti society has no problem with non-heteronormative sexualities, the possibility of bisexuality seems nonexistent or deliberately brushed aside, and each instance of a homosexual relationship (few, or two, as they are) is temporary, one-sided, unfulfilling, and not nearly as deep as every heterosexual relationship in the novel. Not only has the inclusion and presentation of the Anarresti opinion on sexuality become self-defeating in that it offers nothing other than to demonstrate the harmful concept that sexual identity serves no purpose here and is not socially recognized (Kaplan 124), the writing and examples given also uphold the very prejudices that are purportedly nonexistent on Anarres. That is, with the novel's poor and negative representations of homosexual sex, love, and relationships, and the only single gay character leaning into homophobic stereotypes particularly prevalent at the time of writing, the idea that Anarres is

devoid of homophobia or prejudice is undone and unfounded—and not in any productive or critical manner.

This dearth of critical analysis of sexual identity and homophobia means that it goes entirely unchecked or unmentioned, not just in the fictional societies presented—which would allow for a criticism of revolutionary or utopian thinking and action—but in the writing of the novel itself. When every homosexual relationship presented is lesser than the long-lasting, significant, and meaningful heterosexual relationships, the message of sexual equality is completely undermined. Indeed, Bedap, the only gay character, mourns his empty and lonely 40-year-old life and pines after the heterosexual nuclear family that Shevek has (Le Guin 370-71). Le Guin chooses to leave Bedap loveless and alone, and implies that “Bedap must shed his homosexuality and endorse traditional family values to be saved” (Tunick 143). This is not only homophobic and uncritical of heteronormativity, it also outright ignores reality. The idea that Bedap wouldn’t be able to find a partner, considering the number and kinds of people who would be drawn to inhabit Anarres, is ludicrous. Even during times of heightened legalized homophobia in our nation’s history, LGBTQ people managed to find jobs and maintain relationships. The Lavender Scare and the code phrase or shibboleth “friend of Dorothy” each exemplify the kinds of underground communities that existed in America during a time when existing as queer was a crime and often “treated” or punished with cruel forms of “therapy” (Leap; OutHistory). Further, Bedap wishing to be straight is not a reflection of the LGBTQ population, even historically. From the first Pride events and protests, to a 2013 study that showed that 34% of the LGBTQ American surveyed said that being LGBTQ was a positive influence on their lives, the desire to be heterosexual instead stems only from negative external circumstances (Pew). Considering that there is no discussion at all of what Bedap’s external circumstances might look like, portraying

him as a self-loathing gay man is an inaccurate leap in logic to say the least. For Le Guin to say that Anarres lacked homophobia is one thing, but to demonstrate the veracity of that statement is another—and one that she does not accomplish.

What also stands out about sexuality in this novel is where it is conspicuously missing. For all her other talking points in the novel, Le Guin makes direct comparisons every other chapter, with odd-numbered chapters taking place on Urras and even-numbered on Anarres. To keep the narrative thread clear, Le Guin uses parallel moments in each chapter to connect, compare, and spark dialogue about topics as they are in the present day on these fictional planets. However, there are none of these comparative moments discussing homosexuality on Urras, no later discussion of the merits of homosexual versus heterosexual relationships (an approach taken with all other concepts in the novel), and though religion and other prejudices and bigotry exist (as evidenced by the classism, implicit racism, and xenophobia demonstrated on Urras as a war rages on), no discussion of homophobia occurs on either planet—merely brief instances of homosexuality on Anarres. Most significantly, however, in the chapters on Urras, there is no discussion of LGBTQ identities intersecting with labor, economic, and anti-war movements, despite Bedap being a perfect manifestation and example of such intersectionality. Instead, we see Shevek in A-Io, a rich capitalist country on Urras, where he has been sequestered away in the rich-male-only world of academia. He has only interacted with rich and frivolous people for over a year, and after seeing his residency for what it is—a part of the larger plot of the novel in which Shevek seeks to break the barriers of (scientific) information sharing between Anarres and Urras, and faces naysayers on both planets—Shevek coordinates with the resident butler, Efor, to help him escape and contact the revolutionaries in A-Io. He thus becomes involved with the revolutionaries, eventually speaking to the entire massive crowd at their organized protest in

front of A-Io's capitol. There, the protesters wave flags of "blue and white... [for] the Syndicalists and Socialist Workers," as well as some banners "showing the green Circle of Life, the old symbol of the Odonian Movement" (Le Guin 298). Anarres' founders had been Odonians, people inspired by the life of an Urrasti woman named Odo who had lived several hundred years earlier and wrote down her philosophical foundations and ideas, spending a good portion of her later years imprisoned in a fort for doing so. Seeing these flags at this demonstration is powerful for Shevek, making him miss Anarres, but the flags and symbols held aloft as these people march upon a capitol building are also evocative of the protests happening in America during the 60s and 70s. Crucially, these protests were about various civil rights causes in response to racism, unnecessary and profiteering wars, homophobia and transphobia, and even ableism, particularly with respect to the soon-to-come AIDS crisis. Every one of these groups or movements is missing from this fictional protest, as the focus is almost entirely upon Odonian anarchy, socialism, and economic inequality, with certain factions also generally opposing the war between the countries of A-Io and Thu (a proxy war taking place in a third country called Benbili).

The problem in leaving out these particular social issues, beyond those already in the novel, isn't so much the lack of an explicit comparison or analogy for every -ism present in Le Guin's contemporary America (and indeed, our America today). Rather, mimicking their protests and movements without including them in this moment is notable because sexual minorities do, indeed, exist in this fictional universe, and intersectionality means that these groups simply cannot be easily separated (Somerville 190). If the Anarresti created a supposedly utopian society wherein sexuality is unimportant and no such related bigotry or prejudice exists, it must have been in response to something, just as these protests are in response to the war and

economic inequality. Odo was responding to something in her society, and her followers must have reacted to something similar to create an entirely new planet that strove to be so different from the one its founders came from. The Anarresti created a new language, a new system of creating and distributing goods, new systems of education, of housing, of equality—all of which have clear roots in responding to the way things were run on Urras, A-Io in particular. But when it comes to their supposedly accepting and progressive attitude about sexuality and sexual identity, that ‘something’ that they should be reacting to is unfortunately left unidentified and unaddressed. Le Guin’s failure to critically address or examine Urrasti homophobia and heteronormativity is troubling, in part because it brushes the issue aside, but also because it ignores social and activist realities like the intermingling of various communities. Minorities and activist groups frequently had overlapping membership, both in the novel and most significantly, in real life. Some LGBTQ groups paired with labor and union movements, for instance, most notably in the UK with the coal miners’ strike (Fisher). Additionally, as with other activist and civil rights groups, political and social ideologies were central to the movements and goals of LGBTQ organizations (Roberts). Civil rights movements were about enacting tangible change, not just a small shift in public attitude, and therefore their platforms were often based on political and legal ideology. But even within these groups, who should have been aligned with one another, prejudice existed. Being gay or transgender, even in Le Guin’s time of sexual liberation and free love, could mean exclusion from other movements and organizations (Phelps 13). What’s more is that, during this same era, a hefty portion of the LGBTQ population in America was more focused on radical Leftist politics in general than they were exclusively sexuality specific organizations (Phelps 13). So Le Guin’s fictional demonstration at A-Io’s capitol looks and sounds like American demonstrations by these kinds of groups, and the use of flags and

symbols specifically echoes LGBTQ demonstrations throughout history and to this day. What happens here, then, is a further erasure of LGBTQ context and history. In not addressing homophobia or the mechanics of the supposed sexual enlightenment on Anarres, and therefore the same enlightenment and free love movement in her contemporary society, the significance of LGBTQ existence is erased and ignored. LGBTQ activists' involvement with other groups thus becomes nonexistent, and the interconnectedness of various social movements becomes invisible. In this way, Le Guin's absence of critical thought and analysis around sexuality ends up leaving a conspicuous gap in her use and exploration of protests, labor movements, and clashes between political ideologies and social castes.

The conclusion of *The Dispossessed* is meant to leave more questions than answers, meant to leave more calls to action and discussion than any solid solutions. Environmentalism, war, government, binary and cisnormative gender politics, economics, and even theoretical physics receive their due, and thus call to the reader to become actively engaged, to develop positions and beliefs, and to find a way to exercise and communicate them in a world filled with strife and conflict. This places the focus on our future, not only as Americans, but also as humans inhabiting the Earth. At the end of the novel, Keng, the Urras ambassador for Terra (Le Guin's alternate universe planet Earth), paints us a bleak picture of humanity's fate should we continue as we are, with Terra having destroyed itself and decimated its population (Le Guin 347-348). And yet, with all of this detail, care, and deliberate action, some of the finer and more crucial social issues are cast aside, paid lip service, absorbed into other issues of note, or erased. Sexuality, despite all of Le Guin's focus on interpersonal relationships, brotherhood, and misogyny, gets a nod here or there, and no more. The solidarity and intersectionality between LGBTQ communities and other activist groups and minorities is erased. Le Guin's silence is

deafening, especially in the context of her LGBTQ contemporaries deliberately beginning to draw attention to themselves, no matter the consequences (Roberts). And what's more, despite the blatant attempt to very casually fix all homophobia in one fell swoop (and thus glossing over the complexity of the real life struggle), every instance and discussion of this "fix" seems to unintentionally and metatextually perpetuate the perceived and socially imposed tragedy or threat of homosexuality. This not only fails to continue Le Guin's excellent thread of ambiguous utopian analysis and discussion on every other topic, but it deprives much of this work of valuable layering and nuance, and even actively perpetrates harm against a community and a history that are, and always have been, at the center of every social movement. This harm is not only seen retroactively, in our present day society which has allowed LGBTQ movements to become more mainstream, but also enacted by the novel at the time of writing. Homophobia has, at its core, not changed at all since then, and the pitfalls of Le Guin's representation are the same now as they were then. These pitfalls lie in thoughtless, one-dimensional, and negative representations of relationships and character, but also in the denial and exclusion of LGBTQ persons from her narratives and discussions about economic, philosophical, and ideological social ills. To do this is to erase the illustrious history of LGBTQ Americans participating in, and indeed spearheading, these very movements.

Ultimately, it seems Le Guin may have surprisingly fallen victim to a staple of inaccurate, populist utopian thinking: simply identifying something as 'bad' by 'fixing' it in a fictional world, considering the solution perfect or self-evident, and thus not fleshing out the ramifications or the mechanics of it. Indeed, rather than creating a critical mirror, it seems Le Guin may have made nothing more than a compact mirror, a small looking glass, on the topic of sexuality and homophobia. For an author so well-versed in nuance, so detail-oriented, and so

methodical and knowledgeable, this all seems in stark contrast with her intent and ability. In the end, not only does Le Guin fail in following her own version of literary utopianism through to its completion, but she demonstrates how easy it is for each of us to fall back into facile thought processes and ingrained forms of prejudice. The silence on sexuality, and the idealized or praised silence from the only gay character on his sexuality and his lack of community, perpetuates the idea that the ultimate goal of these social movements is to make their identities irrelevant, the idea that sexuality “doesn’t matter.” In reality, a free celebration and discussion of identity is the goal as well as the method of the movement, because this recognizes not only a shared history, but also a shared identity. It is this recognition that is radical and revolutionary, not silence (Kaplan 124). The ideal world for LGBTQ activists is not one where identity labels and Pride events do not exist or are not necessary, but one where they receive no backlash or hatred for these things. Community, no matter how it is formed, is always important for social progression and social dreaming. As Odo says, there must be a desire for revolution within the self for there to be a collective desire; if it doesn’t exist there, then it exists nowhere (359). And how can this desire exist in the individual if their individuality, their identity, becomes irrelevant, ignored, unimportant? How can revolution exist, or indeed succeed and continue, if the individual is not considered in their entirety?

The sacrifice of individuality and identity has a troublesome history of becoming less intangible and more literal. Le Guin certainly seems to touch on this in her analyses of life and burgeoning tyranny on both Anarres and Urras, but her blind spot of queer politics and theory reveals just how easy it is to fall into habits of uncritical “common sense”—into the moderate-liberal thinking that ignoring or not recognizing difference is the best and only solution to bigotry. Our blind spots, now more than ever, must be addressed. The breadth of human

experience is vast, and we must actively seek out information to fill in our gaps of knowledge and grow our compassion so that we may engage, in good faith, in social dreaming. Recognition of our differences is not the same as ridicule or hatred of our differences; naming these differences can mean validating humanity, rather than denying it. To ignore the details of our broader humanity is to deny the humanity of those overlooked. These separate groups of identities and individuals are not disparate or irreconcilable, but rather share common goals and must work together to achieve what is best for each group, each subset, each person.

We must work to ensure that no one tries to erase who we are.

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