

“Mending the Arc”

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United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

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Aloha. ‘O Norma Ryūkō Kawelokū Wong ko‘u inoa. Ua hānau ‘ia au ma Kalihi mauka ma O‘ahu nei. Noho wau ma‘ane‘i i kēia manawa.

Aloha. My name is Norma Ryūkō Kawelokū Wong. I was born in Kalihi near the mountains, where I now live.¹ This I cautiously wrote in the language of my ancestors, and then sent to people younger than me to review and correct - descendants who are near fluent, who benefitted from the language revitalization efforts that I politically supported 30-35 years ago, having grown up in a time when the ‘olelo - the language - was slipping away. I am the granddaughter of a woman who was considered fortunate to have attended what was known as normal school where the native language was forbidden, thus able to be an elementary school teacher for 40 years which allowed her to support her son as a single parent. She never spoke Hawaiian until the last two weeks of her life, at which time only ‘olelo Hawai‘i left her lips – to the astonishment of her son and grandchildren - until she passed and became my ancestor in truth and fact.

My story is a common one. If you are a descendant of an indigenous ancestor of the continental U.S., Alaska, and the Hawaiian Islands then, by definition, you are living in the wake of

¹ Norma Wong was born in 1956 in Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii and is of Native Hawaiian and Hakka Chinese ancestry. She is a 1974 graduate of the Kamehameha Schools, a school for Native Hawaiian children founded by Bernice Pauahi Bishop, one of the last native ruling class. As a young adult, she assisted in the first comprehensive field family survey of Native Hawaiian needs conducted by Alu Like, Inc, and in community organizing efforts for political action leading up to the 1978 Hawai‘i Constitutional Convention in which landmark amendments were approved that imbed native rights and values. She was a State legislator, and a policy director for former Governor John Waihe‘e, the State’s only Native Hawaiian governor. Her portfolio included the most high profile native issues of that time - ceded lands revenues, addressing breaches of the Hawaiian Home Lands trust, restoring lands into the HHL trust, returning the island of Kaho‘olawe and negotiating its munitions cleanup. She is a teacher and strategist that brings forward indigenous, spirit-based, and transformative practices and worldviews for contemporary conditions and issues. She is currently part of a hui (group formed for a purpose) shepherding a fundamental policy pivot for Maunakea, also known as Mauna a Wakea, out of the clash between culture and science into a more thriving future based on mutual stewardship. Ryūkō is the name given to her when she became a Rinzaï Zen priest in 2000. Kawelokū is the name given to her by two descendants on the occasion of her 60th birthday, having no Hawaiian name given at birth. Roshi is the title given to a Zen master.

hundreds of years of government policies that sought to norm, even if it meant erasure. You need not have had an ancestor who was sent to a boarding school to have been subjected to the beliefs and therefore the institutions and programs of a country that had a profound misunderstanding of their superiority and indigenous inferiority. If you are a boarding school survivor, the descendant of a survivor, the descendant of peoples who did not survive, the descendant of peoples who buried the pain and did not speak of such things as if you no longer existed, then there is very specific trauma.

What this moment is about

The missed opportunity and potential harm of the usual reactive ways

Aia no i ke kō a ke au. Which ever way the current goes, time will tell.²

In many spirit practice ways, it is believed that the truth that has been buried will arise above the ground when the people are ready to see it, and not a moment before.

Many generations of individuals and clans may need to hold the dark secrets before the night turns to day, and their burden imprints every generation in between. Here we are now, in the purposeful uncovering, revealing, what people call truth-telling. Although we are more than ready to see it and it is more than past the time to do so, there will still be ways that the truth will be hard to bear and misunderstandings will reactively flow. The social justice practice is to center truth and healing in action. There is truth, there is healing, there is “and”. The “and” is frequently given short shrift, or abbreviated in ways that people have come to believe that truth is all that is needed for there to be healing. The truth - once unpacked beyond the data and the analysis and into the stories, one by one by thousands - is and will be painful, hard, beyond belief and understanding. It will reveal the underbelly of who and what the country was and in some ways still is. The truth is a prerequisite that will be revealed not once but over time. Truth is not the same as healing.

Here we are now. The investigative report merely places us on the precipice - a consequential precipice. How will we guide and participate in this moment? If there is a revealing and a political acknowledgement, but not much more, then there is the very real risk that we will have wasted a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity by moving on too quickly. The reversal of systematic erasure - not just an acknowledgement of it - would be a consequential pivot for the entire nation, a true mending of the arc or at the least a significant leap toward that horizon.

² This is the first of four italicized quotes of ‘olelo no‘eau - wise sayings of the Native Hawaiian people, as recorded by scholar and cultural elder Mary Kawena Pukui (1895-1986)

Elements of mending the arc

There is an arc and it has been interrupted. “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” - Martin Luther King. From the indigenous perspective, the arc exists within the context of seven generations - the seven generations that came before, and the seven generations that follow, a span of 120 to 150 years in each direction. While justice is moral, it is a hollow victory if not accompanied by thriving. A seven generations arc exists because of the intentionality of each generation to tend to current conditions while working toward more fruitful futures, passing that responsibility and the wisdom of experience from one generation to another. The bend toward a just thriving is dreamt and cultivated, fought for and worked for.

The policies and willful intent of a country and its peoples can and have interrupted and nearly severed the seven generations arc by forced norming; displacement from land, people, and family; erasure of language and practices and therefore values and ways. Many of these tools of severing are embedded within the institution of policy known as the federal Indian boarding school. In spite of the determined actions to erase, followed by appeasement and neglect, there are still vestiges of the seven generations arc, which is how we may know that indigeneity still exists and isn't just a historical or political frame. But we may have forgotten how to act, how to be, how to make choices as consequential participants in the arc. When a seven generations arc isn't operational and healthy in all respects including being our worldview, then we are severed from agency and our present and future are at effect of others. A severing of the arc is a severing of self-sufficiency and sovereignty.

It is important to understand that a seven generations arc isn't the thin line of blood lineage. The three parts - ancestors, the current generations, and descendants - are all of the peoples³, not just the ones that are named in a given report, not just the ones who were harmed whether we know their names or not, and not just the ones who caused harm. It is true as it has always been that not all of the peoples of a generation will accept the fact let alone step into the responsibility within a seven generations context. The more that do so the more that can be accomplished. The more that can be prevented and interrupted, the more that can be put into motion toward the generations of descendants. A non-indigenous person or institution or government can look at itself as having nothing to do with what happened in the past. Alternatively, it can begin to understand the world as mutually interdependent including the past as it may be connected to the future. At one level, our mending of the arc is in the self-interest of all of our sakes - indigenous and not.

The current generation - by definition - are stewards, sitting at the midpoint of the arc that is seven generations in the past, seven generations in the future. We can think of ourselves as sole

³ In addition to the peoples who lived in a given time and place, there are the non-human beings including animals, plants, mountains, water, the entirety of the living universe

stewards - i.e., the government, or the agency, or the advocates for and on behalf of the peoples, past, present and future - or we can think of the current generation as the midpoint of the arc acting as mutual stewards, taking up the responsibility together in a multitude of roles. Doing so in mutuality in of itself mends the arc, interrupting the habits of hierarchy and assumptions of power.

What are we mutual stewards for? The kuleana - the responsibility - of the current generation is to bring forward the unseen and unhealed with sacred care while persistently and creatively shaping the future story. Understanding that the current generation includes as many of the “all of us” as may be possible, it is the kuleana of this generation to make visible and to see many deeds and peoples who have been otherwise hidden and forgotten both in their pain and in their joy. *He ‘onipa ‘a ka ‘oiā ‘i ‘o. Truth is not changeable.* This is an unearthing that must be done with determination, sensitivity and care, taking the time that may be needed, sometimes slowly and sometimes swiftly, but not stopping once having begun. But to mend the arc, the trajectory of the past needs to be interrupted, which means that it isn’t enough to just lay bare the painful truths of the past. Continue the arc. This is most fruitfully done by coming into the mutual stewardship of the future story, and working backwards to the actions that need to happen today to seed the future.

This kuleana is a consequential midpoint, a pivot point that is taken or not, for better or for worse. Every midpoint in a seven generation arc is a pivot point, but this one seems more potent than most.

What would the pivot be towards? In a long arc, seven generations in the past and seven generations in the future, the potential of the pivot into the long arc is to bring the peoples into more mutuality, harmony, and core strength for whatever it is that may need to be faced.

Potential ways forward consistent with mending the arc

- Iteratively reaching back and casting forward is critical. In the past, there is an accounting of what happened, but also a telling and understanding of why. In the present, there is the connectivity with the past on meta and micro scales with present-day impacts, including the accumulation of impacts over time. Toward the future, there is the imagining of what it would mean, what it looks like, and what it will take to hold the thriving of children at the center, collectively, to mend the arc. It is about the education of children, the safety of children, the transition from childhood to adulthood, the societal role of children. In the present, there is the organizing for future results including pivots and course adjustments. In the present, there is individual and collective revealing, grieving, and coming to terms.
- For this journey of making right and mending, there is strength and possibility in mutuality which will look like, especially at the beginning, as parallel efforts.
 - There is the work within native communities, including native peoples who live in the diaspora outside of native communities. This is the work of revealing and digesting what has happened. This may be in the form of stories, including the use of storytelling to chronicle and to therapeutically process. In many places and among many peoples there will be specific rituals, some in community, and some that may be guided in community for individuals. These rituals include the clearing of peoples, spaces, and places. There is the work of bringing ancestral children home, wherever home may be determined to be. There is the work of reconnection of ancestors and the living with places and peoples that they have been separated from. There is the creative wondering about the world that native peoples hope for, a robust description of what it would mean to not only acknowledge and to reverse the damage but to also leap forward. This may be community by community, peoples by peoples. There may also be the possibility of exploring the beginnings of a pivot of indigenous peoples as a whole across the continent, Alaska and Hawai‘i in relationship to a national policy.
 - There is emergent work that may be possible between native peoples and communities with non-native allies, co-workers, neighbors and friends. This includes the respectful sharing and the respectful listening of what has happened. There is the processing and perhaps a developmental path between people and between institutions, making and strengthening true relationships, and making plans together toward more mutually beneficial futures.
 - There is the work of bringing awareness into the understanding of the American public with the aspiration of pivoting the relationship that Americans have with

the indigenous peoples of this land. Against the backdrop of polarization and othering, this is the most challenging of the parallel work.

- To repair in the ways of mending the arc is to contemporaneously restore that which was intentionally cut off, not as a reparation⁴ but in reconnecting the severed path. Three areas of repair come to mind: the revitalization of language; the reconnection of peoples to place; and renewed worthiness.

Language contains the values and ways of a people, teachings that lose their meaning in translation. The learning of once-only-oral languages must be done person to person, thus restoring teacher-student relationships, the value and ways of mastery. Indigenous languages contain wisdom of the stewardship between people and land.

Reconnecting peoples to place is critical to repairing the arc. Most indigenous peoples in this country have been displaced and dispossessed. Beyond the multitude of issues of land rights, there is the fundamental reconnection of people to be in relationship to land, including water and all aspects of nature. This is even so and perhaps more especially so if you are no longer living on the lands of your ancestors. Nonetheless, do you have a relationship with the lands you are now on, do you know it, care for it, care about it. This relational reconnection is critical to mending the arc of indigeneity, and awakens a critical societal role of indigenous peoples in this country, front and center in a time of tectonic climate change. To have to assume such roles for all peoples, not only your own, is worthy. And worthiness assumed repairs a broken arc.

- Among the transactional habits of political solutions is the monetizing of repair. In its stead, be creative and generous in the investment and partnership in thriving. Resources will be needed for grieving, therapeutic healing, the gatherings for saying what needs to be said and to share what needs to be shared. Resources will be needed if language is to be revitalized, peoples reconnected in relationship to land, and worthiness re-established. Making it possible for peoples - at scale - to have the time, space, and support to just talk and figure out what it may take to repair the arc will take resources, as will the implementation of those dreams and hopes.
- Our children ancestors went to or were taken to places known as boarding schools where things happened that are now being uncovered. Even more than the deeds themselves, these are places where there was loneliness, despair, hurt, numbness, disappearing, anger, fear, hope and the loss of hope, love and the withholding of love, joy and joy muted. The energy of what happened in these spaces and places need tending to if repair is to be had. That is the indigenous way. Places and spaces will need to be tended to, energy shifted,

⁴ Definition: the making of amends for a wrong one has done, by paying money to or otherwise helping those who have been wronged.

memorialized or repurposed, spirits called home. There will be no single plan and each place and space offers its own challenges and opportunities, especially for mending between native and non-native peoples.

This is a generational journey; not a one and done. *E nānā i ka 'ōpua o ka 'Āina. Observing the horizon clouds of the land.* What took hundreds of years to tear to the point of breaking cannot be repaired let alone propel us toward a more thriving future over the course of a few studies, reports, and hearings. There is work to be done, and it can be fruitful.

Ka lei hā'ule 'ole, he keiki. A lei (garland) that is never cast aside, one's child. This is our chance.

Many thanks for the opportunity to testify. I am at your service.