

Testimony of Tonantzin Carmelo
“Reclaiming Our Image and Identity for the Next Seven Generations”
Thursday, November 29, 2012

Intro/History

Meeyeha, Awishconeha, Greetings to Chairman Akaka and the esteemed members of this committee. It is an honor to be asked on the basis of my work to contribute insight and inspirations on reclaiming our Identity as Indian people for the next seven generations.

I'm a descendent of the Mission Indians of Southern California on my mother's side. When reflecting on the theme of this hearing I had to look back on my own family to appreciate what it is that brought me here to this moment. Seven generations ago, many of my ancestors were experiencing the ongoing extreme hardships of first contact. On one side of my family tree, my grandfather Juyunat was presenting his son for baptism to the Spanish friars at the San Gabriel Mission. On another branch of that same tree, down at the San Diego Mission, another grandfather's name was changed from Ulliu to Clemente. His son Francisco acquired the surname of Carmelo, most likely from the renaming of a mountain near his original village. I'm honored to still carry that name.

From that generation to mine there have been numerous challenges to our Indian identity, and perseverance to reclaim and retain it. After the Spanish, followed the Mexican period, which began the parceling and sale of long standing tribal lands and villages. There were revolts, there was resistance.

Then came statehood. In particular, this body's decision to place an injunction of secrecy upon the 18 treaties negotiated between the United States and the various Indian Nations whose ancestral lands became the state of California. These treaties were never ratified, affecting the identification of many of the tribes in California who are today no longer federally recognized, among them one of my tribes – the Gabreilino or Tongva

The Government did identify Indians on the California State Census of 1852, and the BIA attempted to remediate with the California Indian judgment rolls of 1928, 1952, and 1972. My direct ancestors appear on all of these documents. Rancherias and Reservations were established, and educational institutions, such as Sherman Indian School. Two generations of my family resided on the Soboba Reservation, and at least three generations of my family were educated at Sherman.

Four generations ago, my Great Grandfather left the reservation in search of opportunity, moving back to the heart of ancestral lands, the Los Angeles Basin. My family became “urban Indians”. Los Angeles now hosts one of the

largest populations of Urban Indians in the United States ...identity and culture persisting.

My Grandfather and Grandmother spent weekends with family on the reservation and his generation was part of the Mission Indian Federation, a political and social group organized to address the issues affecting similarly situated Indian people. Today, my mother is an avid cultural activist and leader, tirelessly working to preserve Indian songs and dances, and reviving our language. She is also an active member of the pan urban Indian community, both north and south of the border.

The most vexing issue affecting our tribe is repatriation. If ever there was an indignity that screams for redress it is this one. Our ancestral lands are today a sprawling urban area where scores of un-repatriated bodies of our ancestors lie in museums, archeological archives, university storage rooms, and private collections. This is not an issue affecting only recent generations. My own Great-Grandmother faced these issues more than eigh

ty years ago. (I am attaching to this testimony both a newspaper article from the time and a letter written by her in response to an inquiry created by the story for review by the Committee.) Unfortunately, however, repatriation of the remains of our ancestors requires petition by a federally recognized tribe. This hits at the very core of our identity. The name Tongva literally means People of the Earth, a name that encapsulates the core beliefs of our people. These ancestors must be honored, by acknowledging their humanity and returning them to the earth.

My Work and My Attempt to Portray Positive Images

In my work own as an actor, I have had the good fortune to play notable roles in historical pieces. My portrayal of these roles has been inspired by own Grandmothers and from a sincere understanding of my culture, and a respect for that of other tribes. Most important, there is a true connection to the beautiful strength of the Indian women.

I am indebted to the kindred spirits who have provided me with opportunities to hone my craft and develop as an artist. People such as Randy Reinholz and Jeanne Bruce Scott with Native Voices at the Autry, the country's only Equity theatre company dedicated exclusively to producing new works by Native American, Alaska Native, and First Nations playwrights. Similarly, the opportunity to work with Chris Eyre in the only movie to date featuring a modern, professional Indian female lead character has been rewarding as well.

In addition to playing a Lakota prosecutor, I've also played other modern, professional Native roles including a Navaho botanist and, more recently, an Apache physician, as well as several non-native and ethnically ambiguous roles, of which I am equally proud. Obviously, great strides have been made to allow a

person of my color and background to have a far greater amount of creative control, input and opportunity in this industry.

However, what is most important to realize is that artistic expression in film and television is a collaborative process. It takes talented people and diverse approaches can help make a more compelling product. What matters most is that those involved sincerely relate, understand, and honestly portray the story at hand.

As an artist, I seek opportunities to express myself outside of my race and my American/Native American/Mestiza and Latina cultures. In other words, to do what actors do – to tell stories and entertain. Just like any other artist, I should not be limited to playing Native roles. It is important that we strive for this, and equally important that we be embraced for our talents, craftsmanship and ability to contribute.

This is our current challenge: To transcend the stigma of our color and our history by continuing to develop talent as playwrights, screenwriters, directors, and actors into the larger art form of film and television. As Native artists, our current plea is to simply have the same opportunity to harmonize our truths, our ideas, our stories and our talents into the song that is modern American society – all the while being able to maintain those qualities about us that make us what we are, the first Americans.