



1-1-1994

# Our Immigrant Heritage: A Struggle for Justice

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## Recommended Citation

2 *UCLA Asian Pac. Am. L.J.* 101

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# SPEECHES

## OUR IMMIGRANT HERITAGE: A STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

Angelo N. Ancheta\*

Good afternoon. And thank you for inviting me to speak to you on this very important occasion.

I would like to begin with a story. It is not a remarkable story. Nor is it a particularly exciting story. But it is an important story, a story shared by many of us here today.

Sixty-five years ago, a young man named Anselmo left his home in the Philippines to come to the United States and find his fortune. Like many young men of his day, he came to this country to attend college—to become a designer, an artist, perhaps even an architect.

But with the untimely death of his father soon afterward, Anselmo was left heartbroken. He had lived and studied to realize his father's dreams of a better life, and when his father's dreams died, so did many of Anselmo's.

He dropped out of school and began working to support himself. If the laws were written as they are today, he would have become, in our popular phrasing, an "illegal alien."

Like other young men of that era, Anselmo found his way into the tough, low-wage jobs open to Filipinos and other immigrants of color: the restaurants of Washington State, the canneries and packing houses of Alaska, the fisheries of Maine, the farms of central California. He struggled, like the rest of the country, through the Great Depression, and he survived.

He encountered, of course, the overt racism of the time: the segregated housing, the restricted access to stores and restaurants, the threats of violence, the anti-miscegenation laws that denied one of the most basic of human freedoms—the ability to fall in love with and marry whomever you pleased. Even his personal identity was sacrificed when his supposedly unpronounceable name was changed to oblige a bureaucrat's paperwork.

And yet despite this very hard life, he came to love his adopted country. He defended it as a navyman during World War II. He worked for its government as a postal clerk for over thirty years. He married, bought a home, and raised a family, placing a premium on the democratic values that America, at least in theory, has espoused throughout its history.

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\* Executive Director, Asian Law Caucus, Inc., San Francisco, California. A.B. 1983, J.D. 1986, University of California, Los Angeles. This speech was delivered on February 19, 1994, at the 13th Annual Day of Remembrance in Los Angeles. Sponsored by the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations, Day of Remembrance commemorates the internment of Japanese Americans into concentration camps during World War II.

At the time this speech was delivered, Mr. Ancheta was the Executive Director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA). The author wishes to give special thanks to the staff of CHIRLA and to the leaders of the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations for their inspiring work.

The story of Anselmo is not an extraordinary story, but it is a special story, at least for me, because the story of Anselmo is the story of my father. And it is a story that repeats itself countless numbers of times all across this state and all across this nation of ours.

But in today's world, it is also a story haunted by the specter of racism and mean-spiritedness that have come to define the current debate on immigration. And it is a story that I believe has to be told, because if the potential policies of tomorrow were the policies of yesterday, it is a story that would have been radically different, changing my life and my father's life, as well as the lives of just about everyone here today.

Governor Pete Wilson, for example, has called for a constitutional amendment to deny birthright citizenship to the children of undocumented immigrants. In doing so, he would gut the Fourteenth Amendment, a hallmark of our constitution designed to end slavery and the oppression of all people of color. He would also bypass the Supreme Court's mandates and deny public school education to undocumented children. And, he would deny medical care—including prenatal care to pregnant women—to all undocumented immigrants. If this were the law sixty-five years ago, my father's life—my life—could not have been the same. Once my father had dropped out of school, he would have become undocumented and deportable. He might never have found a job, have made it past the Great Depression and World War II, and I might never have been born.

Assuming I managed to make it into the world, I probably would have been born stateless, without a nationality or allegiance. I would not have been able to attend kindergarten, let alone attend UCLA to earn a college degree and a law degree. And if I and any member of my family had become seriously ill, we would no doubt have borne the scars of that illness for the rest of our shortened lives.

Of course, what the Pete Wilsons and the Pat Buchanans and the Dana Rohrabachers of today are advocating is nothing new. We know that the history of this nation has always been a history of exclusion, and our immigration laws have always been designed to keep people out, not to let them in.

The history of American immigration is very much an anti-Asian history: the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Gentlemen's Agreement between the United States and Japan, the creation of the triangular Asiatic Barred Zone, the Tydings-McDuffie Act limiting Filipino immigration to 50 immigrants per year, the barriers to naturalization for Asian residents that lasted into the 1950s.

Cycles of intolerance, economic decline, racism. These have been the constants in the century-plus debate on immigration. And once again, we are at a low-point, where hysteria, nativism, and politics have combined to produce an environment where all people who appear foreign-born—citizen and immigrant alike—have something to fear, whether it is job discrimination, hate violence, or limited access to government aid.

The parallels with the past are striking: We encourage the importation of foreign labor during economic booms. The wave of Japanese immigrants to the fields of Hawaii at the turn of the century is just one example.

We give immigrants the jobs that no one else will perform—working in the fields, sewing our clothes, serving us in restaurants, cleaning up after us. We pay immigrants the lowest wages. We tolerate them at first, even bringing immigrants into our homes to tend our gardens, to care for our children, our sick, and our elderly.

And just as predictable are the popular responses during economic downturns. Immigrants are inassimilable. They take away our jobs. They use up all our resources. Indeed, they threaten our very existence, our culture, our "American" way of life.

Whether it has been the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos during the late 19th and early 20th century, the Oakies entering California during the Depression era, or the Latinos and Asians and Arab Americans of today, the response has always been the same: Immigrants are outsiders. Immigrants are politically powerless. Immigrants are scapegoats.

Of course, political manipulation is part of the cycle as well. Public officials know that immigrant scapegoating works. Look at Pete Wilson's jump in the popularity polls.

Even that most cyclical of California phenomena—the earthquake—has rumbled onto the political landscape, with the federal government's recent decision to deny earthquake relief to the undocumented. We should know better. When Congressman Dana Rohrabacher from Orange County stands next to a FEMA line and moans about the fact that he doesn't hear any English being spoken, we know where his values lie. Denying disaster relief to immigrants is an 8.1 on the race-baiting scale. It's cheap politics and nothing more.

The dominant rhetoric has also taken on a divide and conquer approach. Legal immigration makes our nation strong; illegal immigration tears at the very fabric of society. It's a false dichotomy. What's illegal today can easily become legal tomorrow, and vice versa.

And certainly legal immigrants are not immune from the scapegoating. Congress just passed a law limiting the availability of benefits for legal immigrants who are aged, blind, or disabled. And if the Republican Welfare reform package becomes law, only U.S. citizens would be eligible for federal entitlements, and that bar would lock out all of the non-naturalized Issei who are here with us today.

And on a day when we mark the passing of over 50 years since the Internment, we can also see ominous ties between that tragic period in our nation's history and the America of 1994. Racism and wartime hysteria led to the internment, and the parallels are popping up in today's rhetoric on immigration.

Terrorists from the Middle East. Boat people from Haiti and China. Floods of people overflowing across the southern border. What is our response? Interdict ships in international waters. Build blockades between the U.S. and Mexico. Add and arm more border patrol. Use high tech electronics and sensing devices. Bring on the National Guard and the military to back up the Border Patrol, say our so-called liberal friends Barbara Boxer and Kathleen Brown.

If we've now declared a war on immigration, we can expect the same sorts of deprivations and civil liberties violations that we saw over fifty years ago.

Looks like we've come full circle.

Unfortunately, the policies that are coming forth from both sides of the political aisle are policies founded more on myth than fact, and on rhetoric rather than reality.

Myth # 1: We are told that immigrants take away jobs. Immigrants do come here to work, but what jobs do they fill? How many of us are willing to work in the fields picking fruit, or in the garment sweatshops, or in the kitchens of our favorite restaurants?

And what about the flip-side of the low-end labor market—the immigrants that own businesses, pay taxes, and create more jobs? We never seem to hear about them in the current debate.

We're even told that immigrants take away the jobs once held by poor African Americans. But that's just a red herring that only skirts the real problem: unemployment and economic deprivation in our nation's inner cities.

Myth #2: Immigrants are a burden on government. Immigrants cost the government and the taxpayers money. Sure. But we don't always remember that immigrants are part of the tax base as well. Even undocumented immigrants who get paid under the table pay sales taxes and indirect property taxes when they pay for rent.

We are told that immigrant children are a burden on our educational system. Of course immigrant children are a burden. Just about everyone under the age of 18 who doesn't work costs the taxpayers money. But we seem to have forgotten that education has to be something special: we spend money now to build a better and more skilled workforce for the future.

Health care is just as fundamental. Why wait for people to seek emergency health care when education and preventive care will cost far less in the long run? Why place everyone at risk—communicable diseases don't ask for papers—when some of us are sick and need treatment.

And we certainly can't trust all the huge numbers being thrown around to justify these cuts. The Huddle Study, which Governor Wilson and others love to quote, is seriously flawed. How can you trust a study that says that all immigrants nationwide pay zero in social security taxes? That immigrants entering California after 1992 pay no taxes at all? Or that uses population projections that assume that after 1992, no immigrants will ever leave the country or even die?

Myth #3: Our borders are out of control. Anyone going down to the San Diego area knows that it is a joke down there. But setting up blockades and adding more bodies is only a band-aid solution. Businesses in California want immigrant labor and immigrant consumers, and as long as there are low-wage jobs to be had in the United States, no wall will be able to keep people away. We have to move beyond the current debate and look at long-term solutions to the problem.

So what needs to be done? First, we have to cut through all the empty rhetoric that has colored the debate. We ourselves have to go beyond the easy name-calling. Saying that it's all racist is simplistic and only restates the obvious.

We know that immigrants are not the cause of the recession, and that politicians have to grapple with the changes in both the nature of our economy and the composition of our workforce. We have to change the debate and change the basic vocabulary of the discussion:

Out-of-status immigrants aren't illegal—no human being is illegal—they're undocumented. Education is not a cost, it's an investment in our future. Health care is not a privilege, it's a fundamental right. Earthquake aid is not a political football; it's a basic necessity.

And immigrants are not "they" and "them"; immigrants are "we" and "us."

We live in an interdependent world. Migration is a global phenomenon.

We cannot talk about curtailing the importation of immigrant labor while at the same time we close our eyes to the exportation of capital by transnational corporations across the globe.

We cannot attempt to seal the border when economic inequality and the lack of development and lack of U.S. aid to sending countries will always cause people to migrate to seek higher paying jobs.

We cannot divorce our immigration policies from our foreign and military policies, when we either support or quietly acknowledge regimes that violate human rights and increase the number of people fleeing persecution—whether it is Vietnam, Haiti, China, or Bosnia.

We cannot remove “magnets” to immigration if we keep looking at the wrong magnets. Immigrants don’t come here to have babies or go on welfare. Immigrants come here for jobs. And we have to think long and hard about how we want to combine our labor policies and our immigration policies to do what’s in the best interest of workers, employers, and the economy as a whole.

We cannot insist on employment verification—which is inherently discriminatory regardless of whether you use a social security card or a tamper-resistant I.D. card—without cracking down on employers who exploit immigrant workers by paying less than the minimum wage and maintaining sweatshop conditions.

We cannot insist that a law enforcement agency try to seal our borders while at the same time it wanders around the streets of cities like Pomona and arbitrarily stops anyone who looks like an immigrant.

We have to hold our elected officials accountable for their actions. We have to remind President Clinton that he broke a campaign promise when he continued to stop Haitians on the open seas, and that he showed no resolve when he not only failed to remove the blanket exclusion of HIV-positive individuals, but let Congress enact even harsher homophobic legislation.

We have to remind candidates for office like Kathleen Brown that you can’t be warm and fuzzy about making California a great multicultural state while at the same time you compete with the Governor for who sounds tougher on militarizing the southern border.

We have to show the politicians and the media that immigrants are not simply nameless faces floating at sea or running across riverbeds or climbing wire fences. They are people. And just like my father and my mother and all of the immigrants living here today, they come to this country to make a better life for themselves.

Finally, we have to link up the different communities—both immigrant and non-immigrant—in new ways to change the politics of this debate. This is not a “Mexican” problem. Nor even a “Chinese” or “Haitian” problem. It’s much bigger and more fundamental.

I think we can learn a lot from the redress movement itself. No one gave redress much of a chance back in the 1970s. The internment was just too far in the past. Well, the critics were wrong, and by recalling that painful history and pulling people together, a political movement was built.

Just as the internment history must be preserved, so too must our immigrant history. As the Yonsei and Gosei come of age and gain power, they have to know their history and the histories of other communities whose pasts are rooted in the immigrant experience.

The future of our country is at stake. And we have to choose between becoming a nation that locks its doors or becoming a nation that draws strength from its diversity and grows by trying to make all its members feel welcome. That is what America is all about.

Let me close today by quoting the hopeful words of the poet Maya Angelou, spoken a little over a year ago at our nation's capital. I have chosen these words because as we move forward to address the challenges of the future, we need to find optimism and strength in the beauty of words spoken in the not-too-distant past:

Across the wall of the world  
A River sings a beautiful song. It says,  
Come. Rest here by my side.

.....

There is a true yearning to respond to  
The singing River and the wise Rock.  
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew  
The African, the Native American, the Sioux,  
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,  
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,  
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,  
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.  
They hear. They all hear  
The speaking of the Tree.

They hear the first and last of every Tree  
Speak to humankind today.  
Come to me,  
Here beside the River.  
Plant yourself beside the River.

Each of you, descendant of some passed-  
On traveler, has been paid for.

.....

Here, root yourselves beside me.  
I am that Tree planted by the River,  
Which will not be moved.  
I, the Rock, I, the River, I, the Tree  
I am yours—your passages have been paid.  
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need  
For this bright morning dawning for you.  
History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes  
Upon this day breaking for you  
Give birth again  
To the dream.<sup>1</sup>

Once again, I thank you for inviting me to share these moments with you, and I look forward to our working together to keep the dream alive.

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1. MAYA ANGELOU, *ON THE PULSE OF MORNING* (1993) (read by the poet at the inauguration of President William Jefferson Clinton on January 20, 1993).