



Richard Blanco

GRADES 8–12

Understanding and Analyzing “The U.S. of Us” by Richard Blanco

INTRODUCTION

This lesson plan provides an opportunity for students to analyze Richard Blanco’s poem, “The U.S. of Us,” in the context of current immigration policy and rhetoric. By engaging in the writing and extension activities, students will explore and deepen their understanding of the poem and current immigration issues.

Over the past several years, anti-immigrant rhetoric, bias, discrimination and policies have permeated our country. In August 2019, a deadly shooting that killed twenty-two people in El Paso, Texas highlighted this anti-immigrant bigotry. The suspected gunman drove more than 650 miles from his home to El Paso, a border town that is 85% Latinx, to carry out a mass shooting. According to an arrest warrant affidavit, the shooter confessed that he planned the rampage and made the drive from his home to the border city with the intention of targeting Mexicans. Law enforcement officials said they believe the gunman wrote a four-page manifesto that embraces white supremacist and anti-immigrant views. The FBI is investigating the shooting as an act of domestic terrorism and a hate crime.

In the aftermath of this devastating attack, poet Richard Blanco was asked by *USA Today* and the *El Paso Times* to write a poem reflecting on how the Latinx community is feeling about living in the U.S. “In the wake of the violence of El Paso, I felt an urgency to take a hard look at our place as Hispanics in the United States,” he said. Blanco, author of five poetry collections, was born in Madrid and immigrated to the U.S. as an infant with his Cuban-exiled family. In 2013, he wrote and recited a poem for Barack Obama’s second inauguration. Blanco was the first Latino, immigrant and openly gay writer to write and recite a poem for a Presidential inauguration.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, Language



MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- [Background Information on Immigrant Related News and Issues](#) (for teacher use or one copy for each student)
- “[The U.S. of Us](#)” poem (one copy for each student)
- “The U.S. of Us” poem in Spanish (*USA Today*, October 3, 2019, www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/10/03/el-paso-shootings-richard-blanco-usa-today-poem-en-espanol-in-spanish/3832813002/, distribute as needed)
- *Richard Blanco talks about writing his anthem, the “The US of Us”* video (2019, 1½ min., www.msn.com/en-us/video/peopleandplaces/richard-blanco-talks-about-writing-his-anthem-the-the-us-of-us/vi-AAIeX9c)

KEY WORDS

allies	faith	profit	toxic
ancestors	gallantly	ramparts	trafficking
asset	gleaming	rhetoric	undocumented
asylum	immigrant	slurs	unwavering
bestowing	perilous	toil	

Information Sharing

1. Explain to students that in the wake of the August 2019 mass shooting in El Paso, poet Richard Blanco was asked by *USA Today* and the *El Paso Times* to write a poem reflecting on how the Latinx community is feeling about living in the U.S. “In the wake of the violence of El Paso, I felt an urgency to take a hard look at our place as Hispanics in the United States,” he said. Blanco, author of five poetry collections, was born in Madrid and immigrated to the U.S. as an infant with his Cuban-exiled family. In 2013, he wrote and recited a poem for Barack Obama’s second inauguration. Blanco was the first Latino, immigrant and openly gay writer to write and recite a poem for a Presidential inauguration.

Explain that we will be reading and analyzing “The U.S. of Us,” the poem that Richard Blanco wrote.

2. Ask students: *What do you know about the shooting in El Paso? What are some recent issues in the news around the Latinx community, immigration and people seeking asylum at the U.S. border? As students share, ask how they know or learned about this information.*
3. Based on what students already know, share some information from the handout, [Background Information on Immigrant Related News and Issues](#). Or, distribute the handout to students to read silently or aloud as a class. This handout includes information about the El Paso mass shooting, current immigration issues and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Poem Analysis

1. Have students read the poem, “[The U.S. of Us](#),” silently. Then as a class, read aloud, asking different students to take turns reading.
2. Engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:
 - What is the mood of the poem? How did you feel while reading the poem? What thoughts came to mind as you were reading it or when it was read aloud?

Web Related Connections

Lessons

- [Conditions in Detention Centers at the U.S. Border](#)
- [Huddled Mass or Second Class?: Challenging Anti-Immigrant Bias in the U.S.](#)
- [‘Migrant Caravan’ and the People Seeking Asylum](#)
- [Social Justice Poetry](#)
- [What is the Dream Act and Who Are the Dreamers?](#)
- [What Should be Done about DACA?](#)
- [Why Are Families Being Separated and Detained at the Border?](#)
- [Who Are the Children at Our Border?](#)

Other Resources

- [Children's and Young Adult Literature about Immigration and Immigrants](#)
- [Education Resources on Immigration, Immigrants and Anti-Immigrant Bias](#)
- [Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#)
- [How Should I Talk about Race in My Mostly White Classroom?](#)
- [How to Talk to Young People about the El Paso and Dayton Mass Shootings](#)
- [Listen to the Voices of Immigrant and Muslim Youth](#)
- [Myths and Facts about Immigrants and Immigration \(English and Spanish\)](#)
- [Safe and Inclusive Schools for All](#)

- What is the tone of the poem? How does Blanco feel about the topic? Does his tone shift as you read the poem?
 - What does the title, “The U.S. of Us,” mean?
 - What is the central theme or message of the poem?
 - What images are used in the poem? Why do you think that imagery chosen?
 - Does the author use symbols? If so, what are those symbols and what are they meant to convey?
 - What is the perspective (or point of view) of the poem? How do you know?
 - What poetic techniques are used (e.g., simile, metaphor, personification, tone, point of view, imagery, alliteration)?
 - How is the poem structured? Does it use a regular or irregular form? How does its structure contribute, or not, to the poem’s meaning?
 - What historical or current factors and events are referenced in the poem? Why do you think the author selected those?
 - From what you know about Richard Blanco, why do you think he wrote the poem? Why now?
3. Explain that Richard Blanco’s poem was also inspired by the U.S. National Anthem, the “[Star Spangled Banner](#).” If time permits, discuss the connection between the two poems. Use these discussion questions to explore the relationship between them:
- What poem does The U.S. of Us sound like?
 - Why do you think Richard Blanco decided to use some of the phrases (e.g., “O say...”) as the “Star-Spangled Banner?”
 - Who wrote the “Star-Spangled Banner,” and why? Who wrote “The U.S. of Us” and why?
 - How does the historical context influence each of them?
 - What is the significance of each relative to its history, politics and culture?
 - In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?

Video Viewing

Play the video where the author [Richard Blanco talks about writing his anthem, The U.S. of Us](#). Engage students in a brief discussion by asking: *What did you learn about why Blanco wrote the poem? Do you think he achieves what he wants to convey with the poem?*

Writing Responses

Here are a few suggested follow-up writing activities for students:

- Write a personal reflection about the poem that includes their thoughts and feelings about the status and importance of the Latinx community and/or anti-immigrant bias they have experienced, witnessed or heard about. The writing can be in the form of an essay, poem or letter.
- Write a critical analysis of the poem that includes some of the discussion questions above including the central theme, imagery, symbols, perspective, poetry devices or techniques used, etc.
- Write an additional stanza for the poem that uses the same pattern and that reflects your perspective about the current situation for Latinx people and/or those who are immigrants or that connects to another issue you care about that is taking place in your community.

- Write an imagined interview with the poet, Richard Blanco—which includes both sides of the interview—questions that the interviewer would ask and how Richard Blanco might answer each of the questions. This can also be acted out.
- Write your own poem (or song or spoken word) about the Latinx community, immigration issues or some other social justice topic that is important to you.
- Compare and contrast “The U.S. of Us” with the “Star-Spangled Banner.”
- Write a speech about immigration or issues impacting the Latinx community, using some of the language and perspective from the poem and that includes your own thoughts and ideas and “call to action,” if appropriate
- Write to the poet, [Richard Blanco](#), with your thoughts, reflections and questions.

Use these additional activity ideas to extend the learning from the lesson.

Turn and Talk

As students read and listen to the poem, have them underline words and phrases that are particularly meaningful or impactful to them and circle words and phrases they want to learn more about. Then, have students turn and talk with someone sitting nearby and share what words and phrases they circled and underlined and explain why. As a follow-up, consider having students, with their partners, write a new poem that incorporates these words and phrases and adds some of their own.

Poetry Gallery

Write each stanza of the poem on a piece of chart paper, leaving space for comments or providing several post-it notes for each student. Have students move around the room gallery-style and record responses on the piece of paper (or individual post-it notes) to that stanza. Their responses can include a word, phrase, sentence, experience, picture, feeling, question or reflection—anything that expresses their thoughts or feelings about that stanza of the poem. When everyone is done, have students move around the room again and read all of the reflections.

Group Artwork

Divide students into small groups based on each of the ten stanzas of “The U.S. of Us” poem. To form groups, have students select the stanza that is most meaningful to them. In their small groups, have students discuss the tone, meaning and message of the stanza. Then, as a group, create an illustration, photograph or collage that reflects the tone, meaning and message of the stanza. When the groups complete their illustrations, create a video where students in each group recite their stanza and show the illustration.

Dramatization

Using the same small groups as above, have each group create a dramatic illustration of their stanza. You can provide specific requirements (e.g., three minutes or less, all members have a role, include music or sound, some dialogue). As an alternative, each group can create a “tableau” for their stanza and then perform it for the class. A tableau is a “living picture” which captures and communicates a concept, idea or event. Have students work in groups to come up with their tableau (based on their stanza) and then create it for the class in order of the stanzas. After showing each of their silent tableaus, have each group explain their process for designing it and the tableau’s meaning in relation to the stanza. Consider taking a photo of each one and then put them together with the accompanying words.

Research

Provide students with an opportunity to learn more about topics facing the Latinx community in the U.S. including historical and current immigration issues (see Background Information for some topics). They can conduct research, listen to interviews, watch documentaries and relevant films and explore first-person testimony. They can use some of the resources in the “Additional Reading and Resources” section below (or ADL lesson plans, which include additional reading) and decide on an area of study for which they will investigate further. The culmination of their research can result in a research paper, PowerPoint presentation, timeline of historical or current issues in immigration or a persuasive or argumentative essay that espouses their point of view.

Video PSA

Have students create a video public service announcement (PSA) about some aspect of immigration they feel merits a “call to action.” First, have them watch other [sample PSAs](#) to understand the important elements of a PSA and what is most effective. Ask what they notice, what works and doesn’t work. Point out the important aspects to consider when developing their PSA including: timing; focus on one issue; inclusion of key and relevant facts; provide a “call to action,” and optional components such as people, music, voiceover, special effects. Provide students with the parameters and class time to work on the details and have them work individually or in pairs to bring the project to completion over the course of a few class sessions or weeks. Then have students present the PSAs in class and consider sharing online.

Additional Reading

Read other books of poetry, literature and non-fiction accounts about the Latinx community and/or people who are immigrants, paying special attention to books written by the Latinx community. You can have students form book clubs and read similar books in small groups or have each student read their own and share back with the class. Some ideas can be found here: [ADL's Books Matter: Books about Immigration and Immigrants](#).

Activism

Engage students in a discussion about actions they might take about current issues impacting the Latinx community and/or about immigration in the U.S. These can include advocacy and activism in which they can participate or initiate. Have students reflect on what they learned by reading Blanco’s poem or any of the other activities and ask: *What current immigration issues concern us? What can we do about it?*

As a class, brainstorm different ways they can get involved using some of the ideas from [10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#) to construct some initial ideas. Have students come up with 4–5 possible actions they can take to do something about the refugee crisis. When you have a few ideas that everyone feels good about, divide the students into groups and have each group take on one of the ideas. Alternatively, you can choose one idea as a class and have students work in small groups on different aspects of the idea. Consider ways to involve the rest of the school and community in these efforts.

Additional Reading and Resources

- [“A history of American anti-immigrant bias, starting with Benjamin Franklin’s hatred of the Germans”](#) (QZ, February 12, 2017)
- [Define American](#)
- [“El Paso Shooting: Massacre That Killed 20 Being Investigated as Domestic Terrorism”](#) (*The New York Times*, August 4, 2019)
- [“Feds Admit 1,250 More Immigrant Children Were Separated From Parents”](#) (Courthouse News Service, October 18, 2019)
- [“‘How do you stop these people?’: Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric looms over El Paso massacre”](#) (*The Washington Post*, August 4, 2019)
- [Immigrant Defense Project](#)
- [Mainstreaming Hate: The Anti-Immigrant Movement in the U.S.](#) report (ADL)
- [National Immigration Law Center](#)
- [Richard Blanco](#)
- [The Star-Spangled Banner](#) (History)
- [“We went to a border detention center for children. What we saw was awful”](#) (CNN, June 25, 2019)
- [“What You Need to Know About DACA and the ‘Dreamers’”](#) (*The Washington Post*, June 28, 2019)
- [“When the El Paso shooting happened, we asked a poet to reflect. Here’s his powerful poem”](#) (U.S. News and World Report, October 23, 2019)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
R.4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
R.5: Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
R.9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
Writing
W.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
W.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
W.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
Speaking and Listening
SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL.2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
SL.5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
Language
L.3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
L.4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
L.6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

Background Information on Immigrant Related News and Issues

IMMIGRATION

Immigration is the process of coming into a non-native or foreign country to live. The U.S. has more immigrants than any other country in the world; 40 million people who reside here were born in another country.

“Undocumented” refers to those who are foreign-born, who come to the U.S. without the legal papers to do so and who often have fled their home country because of extreme poverty, danger or desire to be with their families in the U.S. Some people who are undocumented entered the country legally as tourists, students or temporary workers and became undocumented when their papers expired. Many have lived in the U.S. for a long time, have families here and feel like citizens. About 11 million undocumented immigrants live in the U.S.

EL PASO MASS SHOOTING

In August 2019, [a gunman opened fire](#) in a shopping center in El Paso, Texas—a city that prides itself as one of the safest in the U.S. Some families were doing their back-to-school shopping at Walmart when tragedy struck. The gunman shot and killed twenty-two people and injured dozens more. Police arrested the suspected gunman who resides more than 650 miles from El Paso, a border town that is 85% Latinx. According to an arrest warrant affidavit, the shooter confessed to investigators that he planned the rampage and made the drive from his home to the border city with the intention of targeting Mexicans. The FBI is investigating the shooting as an act of domestic terrorism and a possible hate crime. Law enforcement officials said they believe the gunman wrote a four-page manifesto that embraces white supremacist and anti-immigrant views. This manifesto was posted on the fringe social media platform 8chan minutes before the shooting.

FAMILY SEPARATIONS AND DETENTIONS AT THE U.S. BORDER

Over the past several years, migrants from Central America have increasingly sought refuge and protection in the U.S. from three countries known as the “Northern Triangle”—Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. In large part, they are seeking asylum—that is government protection and a safe haven after fleeing persecution in their home country.

In May 2018, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced a new official government policy an expanded “zero-tolerance policy” for migrant families seeking to cross the border. This policy indicated that all migrants seeking to cross the border without documentation would be referred to the Department of Justice (DOJ) for prosecution of a crime, rendering their children unaccompanied minors. Children accompanying those adults were deliberately separated from their parents and held at juvenile shelters while the adults were held at adult detention facilities.

After a national outcry about these policies, President Trump signed an Executive Order in June 2018, claiming to end family separations at the border. However, it did not guarantee that families would not be separated and it allowed for immigrant children and families to be detained indefinitely. In October 2019, a Health and Human Services official told a federal judge that the government likely separated an additional 1,250 immigrant children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border before formally announcing the “zero tolerance” immigration policy.

In the past year, the humanitarian crisis at the border has worsened for those seeking asylum. Problems go well beyond the forced family separations and detentions that were highlighted in the summer of 2018. Migrant children are still being held in overcrowded, unsanitary and dangerous detention facilities in violation of an

agreement which requires that children be moved quickly and housed in safe, sanitary conditions. These conditions are not unique to children; there have been reports of overcrowded, squalid and unsafe conditions in adult facilities.

DACA AND DREAMERS

DACA (Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals) is a program that shields some young undocumented immigrants—who often arrived at a very young age in circumstances beyond their control—from deportation. In 2012, President Obama issued the DACA executive order after the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act did not pass in Congress several times. The recipients of DACA are young people who have grown up as Americans and identify themselves as Americans. Many have no memory of or connection with the country where they were born. Under current immigration law, most of these young people have no way to gain legal residency even though they have lived in the U.S. most of their lives. The young people impacted by DACA and the DREAM Act are often referred to as “Dreamers.”

On September 5, 2017, President Trump ordered an end to DACA. This decision meant that over time, 800,000 young adults who were brought to the U.S. as children and qualify for the program, would become eligible for deportation and lose access to education and work visas. Since then, several lawsuits have been filed against the termination of DACA. Two federal appellate courts have now ruled against the administration, allowing previous DACA recipients to renew their deferred action, and the Supreme Court has agreed to review the legal challenges.

ANTI-IMMIGRANT RHETORIC AND POLICIES

The U.S. has a long history of [anti-immigrant bias](#). During the 2016 presidential election campaign and continuing today, we’ve seen a sharp increase in the level and amount of negative and stereotypical rhetoric about immigrants. Rhetoric around Mexican people “bringing drugs, bringing crimes” and “they’re rapists” was a central part of our national discourse during the election. The campaign chant of “build the wall” (referring to a proposed wall to be built on the Mexican border to keep immigrants out) made its way into the school hallways and varsity sports even. Anti-Muslim language and sentiment moved from calls for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” into a travel ban policy, which targets mostly Muslim majority countries.

“The U.S. of Us”: A poem by Richard Blanco

By Richard Blanco, USA Today on 10.10.19

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Word Count **637**

Level **MAX**



Poet Richard Blanco was Barack Obama's inaugural poet in 2012, and now, in the wake of the El Paso shooting, he has an anthem for America. Photo by: Hannah Gaber/USA Today

Editor's Note: Richard Blanco is the fifth presidential inaugural poet in U.S. history — the youngest, first Latino, immigrant and gay person to serve in such a role. Born in Madrid to Cuban exile parents, the negotiation of cultural identity and place characterize his work. He is the author of five poetry collections, including "How to Love a Country" (2019) which explores the many sociopolitical issues of the United States, past and present.

Blanco wrote the following poem for USA Today. This work reflects his view of how Latinos are feeling in America in the wake of the August 3, 2019, mass shooting in El Paso, Texas, that killed 22 people. His poem aspires "to celebrate our incredible contributions ... as an antidote for the fear and isolation we are feeling and fighting right now."

O say, can you see us by the dawn of our ancestors' light still breathing through the cities we forged from the wind of our wills, drenched in the rain of our dusty sweat, and christened for the faith gleaming in our saints' starry eyes: San Francisco, San Antonio, San Diego?

O say, when will you have enough faith in us to meet the gleam of our eyes in your own, when will you see us as one in this one country we all so proudly hail, and tear down the ramparts that divide us from you, instead of raising new walls?

O say, when will you believe our hands across our hearts' unwavering belief in those broad stripes and bright stars waving in the same sky above our same schools, churches, and baseball fields?

O say, when will you un-translate us, un-italicize us from the lands and mountains our lives rooted and named: la Sierra Nevada, la Florida, Montana, Sangre de Cristo, Tejas, Nuevo México?

When will you recognize the shared words of our shared history: say, rodeo and bronco; say, patio and plaza; say, bonanza and canyon; say that you hear our rivers gallantly streaming in Spanish: río Colorado, río Los Angeles, río Grande?

When will you stop drowning us, trafficking us like cattle in trucks, corralling us in kitchen alleys and musty motel rooms, scarring our children's faces behind the striped shadows of iron bars, rebranding our skin as rapists and murderers lurking behind you? When will our immigrant toil and struggling dreams not be your ploy for profit? When will you praise us as assets and allies?

We will not live our worthy lives in fear and shame.

O say—look at us: we're the determination in our dirt-creased hands harvesting lettuce, and the firm handshakes of our mayors bestowing keys to their cities; we're the silent chopping of onions you don't hear at your dinner table, and the silence in the eyes of astronauts awing a nationless Earth.

O say—listen to us: we're the snip-snip of gardeners trimming your hedges, and the rattle of our maracas playing on the radio; we're the kind voices of bus drivers wishing you a buenos días, and the pop voices of singers stirring you to dance into your bodies; we're the riveting of steel piecing cars together, and the beats of our poets pounding out lyrics.

O say—feel us: we're the strength of nannies pushing strollers up park hills, and the muscle of batters swatting home runs over stadium walls; we're the prideful tucking of satin hotel sheets, and the pride of graduates in satin gowns.

O say: then why the bombs of slurs still bursting in the toxic air against us? Why the rockets' red glare of your eyes aimed at us in this needless, perilous fight?

O say let there be proof that star-spangled banner still waves for us, too. Let the land of the free count us in, too. Let the home of the brave remain our home, too.

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