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Self, Home and Belonging

Through a journey of self-exploration, acclaimed inaugural poet Richard Blanco shares his quest of finding himself and a country to call home

April 17, 2014 | Jill Rodrigues ‘05

BRISTOL, R.I. – The discovery of oneself and a place in the world – a community to belong to and call home – is a universal quest many pursue throughout a lifetime.

For Richard Blanco, his constant exploration of self and country has taken him from Cuba to Miami to the presidential inauguration podium in Washington, D.C., where his lifelong hunt was finally transmuted into a sense of belonging – an embracing of experiences that he expressed in his acclaimed poem “One Today,” written for and shared with Americans across the country as the fifth U.S. inaugural poet at President Barack Obama’s 2013 inauguration.

His journey was complicated by the fact that he belonged to three different countries in the first 45 days of his life – and that early on he identified as gay in a culture and era that resisted accepting his sexuality, Blanco shared with an audience as part of a President’s Distinguished Speakers Series event on Tuesday evening. Just before his birth, Blanco’s family was exiled from Cuba and relocated to Madrid, Spain, where he was born; a few weeks later they immigrated to New York City, and then settled in Miami.

Although he has, essentially, lived his entire life in America, 1970s Miami boasted an insular Cuban community that Blanco described as a “cultural purgatory.” Growing up in Miami, he said, was “so close to the United States but not quite America.” Some of his poetry explores this process of
“negotiating between these two worlds,” via a concept of American culture through the eyes of his family and investigating the story of his parents’ lives before he entered their world.

Learning about the courage and faith required of his mother to forsake her country and all her family and friends in Cuba helped him begin to understand his own story, Blanco said. He delved into this idea in “Mother Country,” a poem he intoned in a rich, lilting baritone with dramatic pacing accented by a raised hand for emphasis and his eyes sweeping the audience.

“To love a country as if you lost it,” he commenced, and continued reading the poem that deliberated on the notion that his mother sacrificed everything to travel to a country “she knew only as a name or a color on a map.” Taking on a Spanish woman’s inflection and scrunching his face into an aged appearance, he read the closing lines in his mother’s voice:

“You know, mijo, I’ve been thinking. It isn’t where you’re born that matters,

it’s where you choose to die – that’s your country.”

Still, Blanco, whose other trade is civil engineering, ceaselessly searched for a place to belong to – trying Cuba, Madrid, New England, jaunts around the world and a return to Miami. While revisiting these places “filled in so many blanks,” nothing satisfied his thirst, he said.

It was the experience of being called upon to be the fifth inaugural poet – the first Latino, immigrant and gay writer to serve as inaugural poet – that changed his life, he said. He explained that as an immigrant, there was a part of him that had always thought America was not his home. But having to write three new poems in only three weeks – poems about home and belonging – he ultimately uncovered his sense of country.

“The greatest gift of the inauguration, really, was to finally feel like I had a place at the table. To finally, through poetry – because every creative endeavor is an emotional endeavor as well – to realize that home, in some ways, was in my backyard all along,” he said.

Looking out at a sea of people on the Washington Mall, his mother seated behind him as he stepped to the podium to read, “One Today,” Blanco said he recognized that everyone there was joining in the same experience – of celebrating and receiving this country as their home; that “every one of their stories is American.”

“In that moment I feel America standing as one,” he recounted to the audience in a passage from his book recounting the experience. “I embrace America in a way I never had, or thought I could, feeling for the first time that I belong, truly belong, to one country. Not an imaginary ideal from TV or a nostalgic island floating in the sea of my parents’ memory but a real, tangible place that is mine, was mine, all along.”