Activity 5: “Matters of the Sea”

On August 14, 2015 Richard Blanco read his poem “Matters of the Sea” at the opening of the United States Embassy in Habana Cuba. Blanco says “… the inspiration that first came to me was this idea of those 90 miles that everyone always sort of talks about that’s almost at this point cliché - you know, the 90 miles between these two countries that might as well be 9,000 miles. So I started thinking about that and how to make that something not about separation, but about unification. And so it's the sea that separates us, but it’s also the sea that unites us.”

Watch the video clip of Richard Blanco reading “Matters of the Sea” then analyze the poem to appreciate its meaning. https://youtu.be/M1GqJURaTI0.

| The sea doesn’t matter,                      | Our mothers teaching us how to read in Spanish or English, |
| What matters is this.                        | How to tie our shoes                                       |
| We all belong to the sea between us,         | How to gather fall colors or                               |
| All of us.                                  | Bite into a guava.                                          |
| Once and still the same child who marvels    | Our fathers worn by the weight of clouds,                  |
| at a starfish,                               | Clocking in at factories                                  |
| Listens to hollow shells,                    | Or cutting sugar cane                                      |
| Sculpts dreams into impossible castles.     | To earn a new life for us                                   |
| We've all been lovers,                      | My cousins and I now scouting the same skies               |
| Holding hands,                              | Above skyscrapers or farms                                 |
| Strolling down either of our shores.         | Waiting for time to stop                                   |
| Our footprints,                             | And begin again.                                            |
| Like a mirage ourselves,                     | When rain falls,                                            |
| Vanish in waves that don’t know their birth  | Washes its way to river or street                           |
| Or care on which country they break,         | Back to the sea.                                            |
| They break.                                 | No matter what anthem we sing,                             |
| They bless us and return to the sea,         | We’ve all walked barefoot and bare soul                     |
Home to all our silent wishes
No one is the other to the other, to the sea,
Whether unhemmed island or vast continent.
Remember our grandfathers,
Their hands dug deep
Into red or brown earth,
Planting maple or mango trees
That outlived them.
Our grandmothers,
Counting years while dusting photos of their wedding days,
Those brittle family faces still alive
On our dressers now.

Among the soar and dive of seagull's cries
We've proffered our sorrows and hopes
Up to the sea.
Our lips anointed by the same spray of salt laden wind,
We've fingered memories and regrets
Likes stones in our hands that we can't just toss.
Yet, yet
We've all cupped seashells to our ears.
Listen, again
To the echo.
Today the sea's still telling us
The end to all our doubts and fears
Is to gaze into the lucid blues of our shared horizon,
To breathe, together,
To heal, together.

1. How does this poem make you feel? Why? What are the words or images that make you feel this way?

2. List 5 references to the United States and 5 references to Cuba.

3. What are some differences between Cubans and North Americans?

4. What commonalities do Cubans and North Americans share?

5. List words or images that make you sad.

6. List words or images that make you feel optimistic.
7. List words that refer to the sea.

8. Why do you think that Blanco says that the sea doesn’t matter?

9. How does Blanco play with the word “matter”?

10. Listen to Richard Blanco read the poem again. What is his tone? List 4 adjectives that describe his voice, his interpretation of the poem. Was his tone fitting to the occasion? Explain your ideas.

11. What is Richard Blanco’s message for Cuba and the United States?

12. Lagniappe - Why are there so many bare flag poles in front the US Embassy in Cuba?