Poet’s Kinship With the President

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/sheryl_gay_stolberg/index.html) Published: January 8, 2013, *The* *New York Times*

WASHINGTON — From the moment Barack Obama burst onto the political scene, the poet [Richard Blanco](http://www.richard-blanco.com/), a son of Cuban exiles, says he felt “a spiritual connection” with the man who would become the nation’s 44th president.

Like Mr. Obama, who chronicled his multicultural upbringing in a best-selling autobiography, “Dreams From My Father,” Mr. Blanco has been on a quest for personal identity through the written word. He said his affinity for Mr. Obama springs from his own feeling of straddling different worlds; he is Latino and gay (and worked as a civil engineer while pursuing poetry). His poems are laden with longing for the sights and smells of the land his parents left behind.

Now Mr. Obama is about to pluck Mr. Blanco out of the relatively obscure and quiet world of poetry and put him on display before the entire world. On Wednesday the president’s inaugural planners will announce that Mr. Blanco is to be the 2013 inaugural poet, joining the ranks of notables like Robert Frost and Maya Angelou.

“Since the beginning of the campaign, I totally related to his life story and the way he speaks of his family, and of course his multicultural background,” Mr. Blanco said in a telephone interview from the rural village of Bethel, Me., where he lives with his partner. “There has always been a spiritual connection in that sense. I feel in some ways that when I’m writing about my family, I’m writing about him.”

Mr. Blanco must now compose an original poem for the president’s ceremonial swearing-in on the steps of the Capitol on Jan. 21. (Mr. Obama will take the official oath at the White House on Jan. 20, as required by the Constitution.) Addie Whisenant, the inaugural committee’s spokeswoman, said Mr. Obama picked Mr. Blanco because the poet’s “deeply personal poems are rooted in the idea of what it means to be an American.”

Friends of Mr. Blanco’s, and fellow poets, say the president could not have found a more perfect fit.

“I think he was chosen because his America is very similar to the president’s America,” said Liz Balmaseda, who met Mr. Blanco in the mid-1990s when he was just emerging as a poet, and she was working as a columnist for The Miami Herald. “You don’t have to be an exile, you don’t have to be Latino or gay to get the yearning in Richard’s poetry.”

Mr. Blanco, 44, was conceived in Cuba, born in Spain and raised and educated in Miami, where his mother was a bank teller, his father a bookkeeper, and his grandmother — “abuela” in his poems — was a looming, powerful presence. Family folklore has it that he was named for Richard M. Nixon, his father’s favorite president, who took a strong stand against Fidel Castro.

The Blanco home was a modest place where pork was served on Thanksgiving (in his first published poem, [“América,”](http://www.richard-blanco.com/city-of-a-hundred-fires/america.php) Mr. Blanco writes that he insisted one year on having turkey), and Latin music played on holidays and birthdays. Theirs was a world dominated by food and family, where “mango,” as Mr. Blanco writes in another poem, [“Mango, Number 61,”](http://www.richard-blanco.com/city-of-a-hundred-fires/mango61.phpwrites) “was abuela and I hunched over the counter covered with the Spanish newspaper, devouring the dissected flesh of the fruit slithering like molten gold through our fingers.”

Like many immigrant families, Mr. Blanco’s parents wanted a better life for their son. “The business was survival,” he said. He was instructed that he had three career choices: doctor, lawyer or engineer. He was “a whiz at math,” he said, so he chose engineering, suppressing his creative side (and his homosexuality) to win the approval of his grandmother, who thought he was too feminine.

As an engineer, Mr. Blanco helped design bridges, road improvements and an architectural site plan for City Hall in South Miami. But in his mid-20s, he said, he began asking himself questions about “identity and cultural negotiations and who am I, where do I belong, what is this stuff about Cuba my parents keep talking about?” Suddenly he felt “a deep need” to write.

Mr. Blanco decided to pursue a master’s degree in fine arts and creative writing, taking courses at night at Florida International University, where he had earned his engineering degree. His mentor there, Campbell McGrath (who also happens to be a childhood friend of Elizabeth Alexander, Mr. Obama’s first inaugural poet), said Mr. Blanco’s facility with numbers and structural design shines through in his writing.

“Richard was always a complete engineer within poetry,” Professor McGrath said. “If you said it needs a little work here or there, a whole transfiguration of a poem emerged. He understood revision not to be just a touch-up job but a complete reimagining, a reworking. I know that’s connected to his engineering skill.”

Mr. Blanco’s first collection, “City of a Hundred Fires,” which grew out of his graduate thesis, won the 1997 Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize, a prestigious literary award for a first full-length book of poetry, and was published the next year by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Soon he was flooded with teaching offers; he taught for a time at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, and Georgetown University and American University in Washington while continuing his engineering work. Only recently did he give up engineering to write full time.

While “City of a Hundred Fires” and Mr. Blanco’s second book, “Directions to the Beach of the Dead” (University of Arizona Press, 2005) explore his Cuban heritage, Mr. Blanco’s most recent collection, “Looking for the Gulf Motel,” published last year, incorporates his life as a gay man in the very conservative Cuban culture.

“It’s trying to understand how I fit between negotiating the world, between being mainstream gay and being Cuban gay,” he said.

Now Mr. Blanco, who is also at work on a memoir, is focused on an entirely new and, colleagues say, exceedingly difficult endeavor: composing what is known in his trade as an “occasional poem,” written to commemorate a specific event. After learning of his selection on Dec. 12 — he has kept it a secret even from his mother — he began drafting three poems; the Obama team will pick one for him to read at the inaugural ceremony.

“The challenge,” he said, “is how to be me in the poem, to have a voice that’s still intimate but yet can encompass a multitude of what America is.”

Mr. Blanco will be the nation’s fifth inaugural poet; the practice was begun by John F. Kennedy, picked up by Bill Clinton and continued by Mr. Obama. Cynics might say that in picking a Latino gay poet, Mr. Obama is covering his political bases; some gay people objected to his selection of the Rev. Rick Warren, an opponent of same-sex marriage, to deliver the invocation at his 2009 inauguration.

But Mr. Blanco says Mr. Obama’s inaugural theme, “Our People, Our Future,” resonates with him. He wants to write, he said, about “the salt-of-the-earth sense that I think all Americans have, of hard work, we can work it out together, that incredible American spirit that after 200-plus years is still there.”

A version of this article appeared in print on January 9, 2013, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Poet’s Kinship With the President.