



## LEARNING GUIDE

# *Land of the Cranes*



*Land of the Cranes* by Aida Salazar  
Ages 8 to 12; Grades 3 to 7  
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Audiobook and ebook also available

### **About the Author**

Aida Salazar is an award-winning author and arts activist whose writings for adults and children explore issues of identity and social justice. She is the author of the middle grade verse novels, *The Moon Within*, *Land of the Cranes*, and the biography picture book *Jovita Wore Pants: The Story of a Revolutionary Fighter*. She is a founding member of Las Musas, a Latinx kidlit debut author collective. She lives with her family of artists in a teal house in Oakland, CA.

### **About the Writer of this Guide**

Dr. Carla España is a Bilingual/TESOL instructor at Bank Street Graduate School of Education and the co-author of *En Comunidad: Lessons for Centering the Voices and Experiences of Bilingual Latinx Students*. Her work lives at the intersection of children's literature, bilingual education, translanguaging, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and teacher preparation.

### **About The Book:**

From Aida Salazar, author of *The Moon Within*, comes the heart-wrenchingly beautiful story in verse of a young Latinx girl who learns to hold on to hope and love even in the darkest of places: a family detention center for migrants and refugees.

Nine-year-old Betita knows she is a crane. Papi told her the story before her family fled to Los Angeles to seek refuge from cartel wars in Mexico. The Aztecs came from a place called Aztlán, what is now the Southwest US, called the land of the cranes. Papi tells Betita that they are cranes that have come home.

Then one day, Betita's beloved father is arrested by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and deported to Mexico. Betita and her pregnant mother are left behind, but soon they too are detained and must learn to survive in a family detention camp. Even in cruel and inhumane conditions, Betita finds heart in her own poetry and in the community she and her mother find in the camp. The voices of her fellow asylum seekers fly above the hatred keeping them caged. An emotional and powerful story with soaring poetry.



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### Preparing Our Learning Space

Real-world issues like family separation, racist immigration policies, and inhumane conditions must be addressed if we are to learn and do better as educators and humans. The stories of Betita and the other children and mothers in *Land of the Cranes* have given us lifelong lessons on how to discuss these topics with children. As we prepare to read and process with young learners, we must consider:

**SAFETY:** What are the support systems in the learning community for children to process the reality of family separation and the injustice at detention facilities? How can we create space for children to share their feelings and not feel that this is mandatory, especially for children who have experienced trauma? For example, can we partner with counselors or social workers? We can also work with colleagues to consider interdisciplinary opportunities, not only with content areas such as social studies and language arts but also with art, music, and health.

**DISCUSSION ENTRY POINTS:** What are the picture books, films, documentaries, artwork, songs, poems and other media on these topics that we can engage with prior to our reading? We can read Yuyi Morales' picture book *Dreamers*, discuss the music video for [Un Besito Más](#) by Jesse & Joy and compare it to the music video for [Wake Me Up \(Acoustic\)](#) by Aloe Blacc. We can read short excerpts from memoirs by Diane Guerrero and Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, focusing on the moment of family separation and how that impacted them as teens. We can also use poetry and illustrations, such as Jorge Argueta's *Somos como las nubes/We Are Like the Clouds*.

**TEXT SETS:** Create text sets that are multimodal, and that not only reveal the horrors of this topic but also teach about resistance, advocacy and efforts for social justice. You might include information from organizations that provide legal services, education, and community organizing, including: **CASA, Al Otro Lado, Make the Road New York, and Immigration Advocates Network.**

### Discussion Questions

1. We learn about Aztlán and its importance in the stories that Papi shares in "Where We Land." Why is it important for Betita to know these old stories about where their family comes from and where they are going? What other stories do you know that describe the origins of a group of people and their purpose? How are these stories similar? How are they different?
2. In "Crane Poem Gallery," Betita describes Papi's way of speaking as "Spanish-sounding English warm soft round words." She notes that the principal tried to correct Betita's own "singsong East LA English," while her teacher Ms. Martinez "never cared one speck about" the way she spoke. Consider the different sounds, words, idioms, and expressions that you've heard in one or more languages. How do people react to different kinds of English and Spanish? Why do you think someone might react like the principal, as opposed to the teacher's more welcoming approach?



## Discussion Questions, continued

3. When the injustices of our world seem too heavy to carry alone, we turn to various people, places, and practices to help sustain us. In “We Planted Roses Too” and “Virgencita Angel,” we witness Mami’s spiritual practice. Betita says that Mami “prays for protection,” and also shares more about Tio Pedro. What are some practices that help you find the support you need so you don’t carry the weight of everything on your own? Where did we learn about these practices or rituals? What are other ways we can process and help one another?

4. What makes a place a “sanctuary” for immigrants? Why are these places necessary? Read the poem “Sanctuary Breakfast” and research sanctuary states. Return to the poem and consider how Papi explains the concept to Betita, saying that it is for people who get caught “wanting to fly.”

5. In “The Amparo Globe” we get to know Amparo, Betita’s best friend. Betita is thrilled that her friend listens to Papi’s stories and “knows she is a crane too.” Being thoughtful and being a careful listener are important to a strong friendship. What are some other keys to being a good friend?

6. Over the course of the book, Betita navigates some of the realities of being undocumented in the modern-day United States. In “Walls,” Mami talks about the family being undocumented. In “Questions” and “Learning Tears,” Betita’s school facilitates a dialogue about what is happening with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) “round-ups,” including providing instructions to make a family plan, and social workers are present in the school, encouraging students to process these events in whatever way they’d like. In “Our Flock,” the family is in conversation with lawyers when Betita learns that “Papi will be put on a plane and flown to Mexico.” Consider: where, and how, do *you* learn about immigration issues? How do classrooms, libraries, and community events engage with these issues? What dominant narratives about immigration must we unlearn? Where do these ideas come from, and how do they compare with the counter-narratives that we learn through Betita’s story?

7. “No matter how we struggle, remember to keep life sweet,” says Papi. What are some examples of Betita and her family finding joy in the midst of injustice? How do you and your family find joy amidst injustice in your own life?

8. Consider the physical and psychological conditions of the detention facility. How do these conditions impact the children and their mothers? Describe how Betita and Mami keep “searching for light” in the midst of the inhumane and terrifying conditions at the detention center.

9. When Betita and Mami arrive at the detention center, they meet other children and mothers that have been detained and separated from the rest of their families. What do we learn about Josefina’s family and about “practically unaccompanied minors”?





## Discussion Questions, continued

10. In “Inside My Alas,” “I Draw and Spell in Alas,” and “They Draw and Spell,” we learn more about what Betita and the other children experience in the detention facility, and about their journeys leading up to that moment. The children draw and write their feelings, experiences, and dreams. Compare their testimonies to those displayed in the University of Texas at El Paso exhibit [Uncaged Art: Tornillo Children’s Detention Camp](#). How did the children in the book and at the Tornillo Detention Camp use art to process?

### Themes in *Land of the Cranes*

The poems listed below are organized by theme, and provide an entry point to discuss these topics.

#### A Sense of Place

“A Soft Memory”  
“What I Know”  
“Where We Land”  
“The Amparo Globe”  
“Community Corn”  
“Friendship Park”  
“Border Beach”

#### Self-Expression

“Crane Poem Gallery”  
“I Spell a Spell”  
“A Song”  
“Crane Poems”  
“Yellow Hair Shower”  
“Sick”  
“Fake Feel Better”  
“All About Cranes”  
“Throat School”  
“Toilet Paper Songs”  
“Inside My Alas”  
“I Draw and Spell in Alas”  
“New Testimonies”  
“They Draw and Spell”  
“A Mexican Gift”  
“Mi Querida Betita Plumita, My Little Crane”  
“Papi Poems”

#### Immigration

“Sanctuary Breakfast”  
“Cartel”  
“The Big House”  
“Walls”  
“Questions”  
“Our Flock”  
“Learning Tears”  
“Cajita de Tesoros”  
“Faith Exit”  
“Mouth Patrol”  
“Chichimeca Warriors”  
“Fernanda”  
“Cyclone Dust”  
“The Mountain Before Us”

#### Detention Center Conditions

“A Building Made of Ice”  
“Silver Capes”  
“Hunger”  
“Frozen Food”  
“A Hiss that Hides”  
“Open Toilet”  
“The Trash Near”  
“One Hour A Day in the Light”  
“Twisting Tooth Shoe”  
“That Night”  
“Demands”

#### Ways of Processing Injustice

“Virgencita Angel”  
“A Papi in a Pillow”  
“Learning Tears”  
“Broken Wings”  
“Write Me!”  
“Hashtag Revolution!”  
“Without Hope”  
“Strike!”  
“Marisel’s Fernanda”

#### Gathering Detention Stories

“Josefina”  
“The Deepest Hurt”  
“Almost Solas”  
“Almost Solas in Aztlán”  
“Mami Gathers a New Flock”  
“The Dreamer Arrives”  
“Marisel”  
“The Wildest Crane”  
“They Draw and Spell”  
“Request”  
“When the Government Comes”

Hear more from Aida Salazar and Dr. Carla España at the *Power of Story Presents* virtual panel event [Beyond Borders: Immigrant Experiences in Kidlit](#), available to watch on-demand.