INTRODUCTION: TELLING STORIES
AFTER THE STORM, by Ricia Anne Chansky 1
EXECUTIVE EDITOR’S NOTE, by Mimi Lok 13
MAP 15

Zaira Arvelo Alicea, educator, Aguadilla
“Water was everywhere.” 17

Emmanuel Rodríguez, dental technician, Mayagüez
“I thought I might have to deliver the baby right there!” 37

Ramón López Soto, retired builder, Aguadilla
“I notified the shelter that I was blind.” 55

Shania Tatyanna Lind González, student, Mayagüez
“One pack of Ritz crackers, a candle, and not much else.” 65

Windy Díaz Díaz, retired health professional, San Lorenzo
“I felt forgotten. I was forgotten.” 77

Nilda Rodríguez Collazo, retired factory worker, Toa Baja
“I was floating.” 95

Rafael Ramos Díaz, police captain, Camuy
“Our biggest problem was the gas.” 113

Vivienne Miranda Rodríguez, wellness center owner, farmer, and doula, Rincón
“The boys, my sister, and I got sick from the water.” 119

José García Sepúlveda, pastor, Aguada
“People just wanted food!” 141

Lorel Cubano Santiago, community organizer, San Juan
“We watched the ships come. But we weren’t getting the aid.” 151
Carlos Bonilla Rodríguez, farmer, San Sebastián
“Not even a nail.” 171

Israel and Sandra González, farmers, Adjuntas
“We lost the coffee harvest.” 187

Belle Marie Torres Velázquez, medical doctor, Culebra
“I felt a beating heart.” 207

Neysha Irizarry Ortiz, seasonal hotel worker, Culebra
“Keep the baby warm.” 217

Carlos Figueroa Vázquez, electric lineworker, Juana Díaz
“Without power for nine or ten months.” 231

Luis G. Flores López, salesperson, Juncos
“Without his treatment, he can’t live.” 241

Miliana Ivelisse Montañez León,
customer service representative and doula, Caguas
“She had her last breaths in my arms.” 259

TEN THINGS YOU CAN DO 269

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF PUERTO RICO 273

ESSAY: THE CONTEXTS OF DISASTER 283

GLOSSARY 313

FURTHER RESOURCES 319

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 321
In honor of the thousands who lost their lives in the long aftermath of Hurricane María
We meet Zaira only in lively places: on the plaza of Rincón, where trucks are loading and unloading all around us; at a new breakfast place that is hosting a big birthday party with lots of singing and clapping; in a small bar where an impromptu dance party starts up in the middle of our conversation. Each time, we worry about all this noise—that it is too loud for us to talk or that the recordings will not be clear—but we always change our minds and decide that we are starving for these sounds. Maybe it is the many hours Zaira and her husband, Juan Carlos, spent trapped in their own home as they waited for rescue after the hurricane or the months that have dragged on since then without any government assistance after their house was destroyed, but Zaira tells
us that she wants to be surrounded by these signs of life. As she shares her story, several failures in the federal disaster-response systems become apparent, ones that have led to her and Juan Carlos remaining homeless for well over a year after the hurricane.

“WE’RE WITH THE PEOPLE NOW!”

I couldn’t speak about myself today without going back to Lares. I was born and raised in Lares. Well, actually born in Arecibo. Lares stopped having a birth unit at the hospital years ago. Everything was moved to Arecibo, which is probably a forty-minute drive from Lares. And when you’re in a rush because someone is coming into this world, it’s difficult, but the people got used to it. So, in other times, in another decade, I might have been born in Lares. Generations were born there, and then, suddenly, everyone else was born in Arecibo.

People know Lares because of the Independentista movement and the Revolución del Grito de Lares. It’s known as the mecca where the largest uprising took place in Puerto Rico in 1868 against our Spanish oppressors. And it’s still a place where everyone gathers on September 23 to speak about Puerto Rican independence, nationalism, and other political movements against colonialism and for the people.

1. Lares is a municipality in the central-western mountains with a population of approximately 24,000.
2. Arecibo is on the northern coast of Puerto Rico, approximately eighteen miles from Lares. The roads between the two are mountainous and winding, and the driving is slow.
3. El Grito de Lares was a collective of landowners, agricultural workers, and enslaved individuals who rose up in opposition to Spanish colonialism in Puerto Rico. For more on the rebellion, see “El Grito de Lares” in the “Contexts” essay.
I AM SO FREAKING EXHAUSTED

Every hour we’d look at the phone, check for a signal, turn it off. Wait one more hour, check, turn it off. I remember thinking, at like 11 p.m., as I was all the way up there on the water, seeing my house at this angle—from the top, the ceiling—*It’s gonna be tomorrow soon. And everything’s gonna be better.* Then midnight came, and I thought, *It’s already tomorrow. It’s gonna be over soon.* But all we could hear was the *blook, blook, blook* of the water. There was no air, there was nothing.

Finally, Juan Carlos says, “What’s that? There’s a light outside.” We realized it wasn’t a flashlight outside, it was the reflection of a flashlight from far away bounding across the water. And he had seen it catch the tinted glass of the tiny windows over the front door. I had my flashlight and got really close to the glass, flashing with the same intervals that the other person was flashing, so they could see it was a human being, not some weird flickering light. We realized, somewhere, there was someone else, but we couldn’t see them.

We thought about trying to go through the front door, but outside there was between fourteen and sixteen feet of water and we were worried that we’d get tangled in fences or downed power lines or clotheslines. We were afraid we’d lose track of each other. We knew the lanterns would just turn off in the water, and we wouldn’t be able to hear each other over the wind and rain. At that point, we were about fourteen inches from the ceiling—we couldn’t sit up—and the water was so high that if we got off the mattress, there was no way to get back on. You couldn’t. And hanging onto the mattress for hours was not an option. We would’ve drowned in black water as soon as our arms gave out. So, if we tried to leave the mattress and it didn’t work, we were done.

We were so tired. We were on our backs for so long, twisting and turning, and everything hurt at that point. We tried not to move too much because we didn’t want any sudden movements that might capsize us. We were worried about the risk of the mattress touching
the metal curtain rings—was it going to pop? Or was one of the things that’s floating around us going to puncture it? We stayed that way for almost six more hours. No one saw us. No one came.

When the sun came up and it was finally quiet—maybe 6 a.m.—I broke one of those tiny, tinted glass windows over the door and looked outside, and everything was water. That’s it. It was water, and water, and water. To be able to look out the window, I had to press my head really hard against the mattress and deflate it a little bit so that I could look sideways. We were that close to the ceiling. And I’m holding on with my fingers to the curtain rod, so the mattress wouldn’t keep moving back with the water. That’s when I started blowing on the whistle again. I remember looking out at that strange angle and finally seeing tiny people all the way across that water and thinking, *They’re gonna hear us.* And I whistle and whistle. I can even see two girls turn and point to where we are, but nothing happens. This goes on until 10 a.m. And I am so freaking exhausted by then, I doze off. I don’t know how long until Juan Carlos wakes me and says, “I hear a noise.” So, I pull the mattress again with my hand, and hold onto the curtain rod to look out that tiny window. Above me, I can see what looks like the bottom of a kayak, red and yellow plastic. And I hear a voice asking, “Are you okay?” There are two young men in the kayak, saving us.

Our front door is wooden, and it must have gotten swollen with the water. So, we decide that my husband will pull it while one of the men pushes. To do this, Juan Carlos has to slide from the mattress—so as to not tip it over or hit his head on the ceiling because we’re impossibly close to it—into that super-cold shit water. But as soon as he’s in the water, he starts shivering and hyperventilating to the point where the guy outside can hear him and thinks he’s panicking. We have to yell through that little window to talk to each other, and I tell the guys that Juan Carlos knows how to swim, he’s okay. It’s just that the water is really cold and we’re already cold because we were wet all night. It’s so humid, and the air is so thick
inside the house. There’s something in the air. We were so tired of that smell. It’s like it was inside us, like we wouldn’t ever be able to clean that smell from our bodies. Juan Carlos lets go of the mattress, holds his breath, and dives into black water.

The guy from the kayak dives under that same water and starts kicking the door from the outside, but it barely moves. And he has to get air. Dive down and kick, come up for air again and again, till he’s able to open it enough for Juan Carlos to pull with his hands. On both sides of the door, they kick and pull, come up for air, and dive again—all the while without opening their eyes underneath that dirty water.

When the door was finally open, I grabbed the backpack with all our important papers in it and passed it to the guy in the kayak. I slid off the mattress into the black water and pushed myself into the space where the door was. I put my hands on the top left and right of the door, and spread my legs the same way, holding them open so I wouldn’t go underwater. Only two or three strokes swimming got me past our balcony to the plastic kayak. I held on to some wires at the back end of the kayak and was pulled along with my legs out behind me, careful not to let them hang down into the water. There were lots of things in that water. Whole uprooted trees—guava, lemon—barbed wire, electric pole wiring, fences. Lizards! I had lizards try to take a ride on me. I remember ducking so that I didn’t hit the wires on a power line that was still standing. That’s how high the water was. I was completely disoriented, had no idea where I was. The kayak just kept going over houses that were also underwater and I would look down at them.

THOSE GIRLS WERE SO BRAVE

Later, I learned that two twelve- or thirteen-year-old girls from a caserío, a subsidized public housing project, near where we lived kept insisting that there were people under the water. When we reached...
dry land, they were saying, “Yo te lo dije que había alguien.” I told you there was someone there. They put their arms around us, and it started pouring again. Everyone else was running away from the rain, but I welcomed it because I was in dirty water for sixteen hours and knew I’d have no chance for a shower, no running water. And the girls, they just stayed there hugging us.

Those girls were so brave. Had they been some other girls, someone might have listened to them earlier. But they were young girls who lived in a caserío. They were wearing shorts that were “too short” and shirts that were “too tight” by some standards. They didn’t have their hair perfectly done and they were just undereducated young girls who spoke in slang, unrefined Spanish. So, the police officers and firefighters ignored them. Everybody ignored them for hours until those two guys in the kayak—to this day, I don’t know who they are—decided to go check it out. When it was finally safe to go outside, the girls were the only ones who heard us, and they kept on telling people until someone listened. Those girls saved our lives.

THOSE FIRST WEEKS

After the hurricane, I started filling out all the FEMA paperwork. I learned afterward from someone who has worked in disaster relief for many years that we filled them out wrong. Seeing the questions “Do you need clothes?” and “Do you need food?” I thought, Well, I’m not hungry right now, and I’m clothed at the moment, although I lost everything. So, I didn’t put the checkmark that we needed things because we were unsure what the questions meant. And, of course, now we know that was the reason for us not getting the $500 emergency funds from FEMA. That was a big complaint we had about FEMA, that there wasn’t a system put in place to determine people’s needs. It was solely self-reported. I learned later that people who were actually in need could’ve gotten thousands of dollars, and that $500 could’ve actually helped us at that point.
Over a month later, we finally hear from FEMA that they’re going to give us $700 so that we can find a place to stay, or we can stay for free in an “approved” place. There was a phone number to call, so I’d call it whenever I could get reception—after the hurricane, reception was incredibly spotty, unreliable—and then you would be placed on hold, and by the time a representative got to you, the call would drop. They wouldn’t call you back, and it was a whole mess.

When I finally got through, the lady who was helping me says, “Well, I have one approved location here in V-I-E-Q-U-“ and I just say to her, “Let me stop you right there. Are you gonna send me to Vieques?” And she says, “Oh, is that how you pronounce it?” And I’m like, “The point is not how it’s pronounced, it’s a different island. It’s not the main island, it’s a separate island. It’s like me telling someone in California to go to Hawai’i to find help.” She’s like, “Oh, that’s the only thing we have, except for some in the Virgin Islands.” I said, “How am I going to make it to the Virgin Islands?” So, we took our own savings and have been living in an Airbnb. Paying for it ourselves. The whole idea that FEMA provided for Puerto Rico is a lie. It wasn’t organized, and it wasn’t covering the needs of people who really needed it. Did some people benefit from it? I’m assuming they did. I think that when you lose your property, to have a roof over your head or have a bed to sleep in must’ve been nice for the people who were able to get the help. So that was FEMA in those first weeks.

I WENT BACK

I went back to our old house for the first time in almost seven months. One of my neighbors, two houses down—my Avon lady, Mari—started communicating with everyone else in the neighborhood who’d had

11. Vieques is an island municipality off the far eastern coast of Puerto Rico. It can only be reached by ferry or plane, neither of which was working after the hurricane. It is also an approximately three-hour drive from Aguadilla to the ferry launch if the roads are open.
a loss due to Hurricane María. She found out that twenty-two families were affected by the flooding, including our own. So, she called upon different agencies that are in some way related to funding that’s supposed to help people after a disaster and mitigate future disasters, and asked them to come to a community meeting, to see what could be done for the neighborhood. She called me and said, “Zaira, tú sabes tú no estás obligado.” She told me that I wasn’t obligated because I was a renter, not a permanent part of the community. But I remembered those girls who had saved us, and I said, “Yes, I’ll come help.”

In our case, there’s evidence to suggest that some of the major flooding in our community was related to activity that happened on Ramey, the former military base. So, we needed to call upon agencies related to the federal government that communicate solely in English. And I’m the one from that community who speaks English. The communities that don’t have an English speaker with a college education: silence. Nothing happens for them.

I thought I was ready to go back. I thought I would feel absolutely nothing. But when I was driving down the road, I couldn’t avoid looking at our old house, even though I had planned to drive right past. Three years of my life took place there. And I’m just looking at it, thinking, That was my home. It used to be safe, welcoming. And it just hits me that even though I’m in my air-conditioned car with the windows rolled up, I’m smelling what we smelled when we were trapped in the flood. It was horrific! Like I’m never gonna be clean. I don’t know how to explain it, but there’s this feeling in my chest, like there’s no air. And I have to just keep driving.

In the years since we first met, we have kept in touch with Zaira, reaching out on each anniversary of the hurricane, after some of the larger earthquakes, and especially after the flash floods of Tropical Storm Isaías. When each new disaster strikes, we check in to see how she and Juan Carlos are doing. On the third anniversary of Hurricane Maria, we messaged for quite some time, catching up and talking through some of
the ways her life has changed in the years since she survived the storm. While her online business is still keeping her busy, Zaira and Juan Carlos have moved to the mountains of Lares and live with her family to save on rent. Juan Carlos is still working in Aguadilla, but they are both worried about his job security. For now, though, they are enjoying free-range eggs from all the chickens running around, picking endless parchas from low-hanging tree branches, and taking long trips to the local lake. “Everyone is healthy,” she tells us. “And, right now, that’s the most important thing.”

I think that the body remembers. The third week of September will just always be a lousy week for anyone who survived María. Our human clock will feel it, always.

I’ve changed from that experience. When Isaías came to Mayagüez, all I could think about was what it’s like to go back to a place called home and not recognize it. To have to tell yourself, “You can do this.” Square your shoulders and then walk back into what was your house to see what you can salvage. All the while, your heart sees what was your home superimposed over the mess.

That’s what it’s been like since María. When the earthquakes started, I made beauty bags for the refugees. I got a whole bunch of old purses and filled them with anything that I remember not having after the hurricane: soap, deodorant, lotion, things to keep your hair off your face, like a clip or a ponytail holder. And I got some medicines, too, for colds, allergies, and headaches. I remember what it was like not to have.

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12. Parchas are passion fruits.

13. Tropical Storm Isaías made landfall in Puerto Rico on July 30, 2020, causing widespread flash floods, mudslides, power outages, millions of dollars’ worth of damage, and at least five deaths.

14. An ongoing earthquake swarm in Puerto Rico began on December 28, 2019. There have been thousands of earthquakes since then, the largest registering at 6.4. For more on the earthquakes, see “Earthquake Swarm” in the “Contexts” essay.
Letters from Our Narrators
Bryan Ramos Romero and his father, Rafael Ramos Díaz

I never planned on sharing my story and I’m glad that I did. I was hesitant, you see, because many of the things I had to say were difficult, unpleasant, and sometimes outright painful to say. I thought, “People don’t need to know or hear about this. It’s too much.” I was wrong. People do need to hear about this. They need to know what happened here and all the things that we, as Puerto Ricans, went through because of our local government, because of our federal government and their inadequacies. Inadequacies that cost the well-being and innocent lives of thousands if not more. We owe it to our own community for most of the good things that happened after Hurricane María.

Rafael Ramos Díaz

Four years ago, our beloved Puerto Rico suffered one of its worst natural disasters to date: Hurricane María. The subsequent struggles with electricity, gas, food, and shelter are imprinted in our minds as a somber reminder of what was and no longer is. In those hard times, we cried, we said too many goodbyes, but we also laughed, and we also smiled; we rose higher than we ever thought we could; our narrators and their stories encompass those times in full.

My individual experience with my father’s narrative was impactful beyond description. It was a difficult process, like opening an old wound and finding that it still ached, but deep down, after each session, I could see the relief in his eyes, and the healing effect that speaking up about those traumas brought. In the end—and I believe I speak on behalf of many other students in the Mi María project—we as oral historians healed and connected alongside our narrators by the end of our work.

This book holds a special place in my heart. It contains the firsthand experiences and emotions of the Puerto Rican people brought upon by Hurricane Maria. It denounces where our government failed us and highlights where our community succeeded in their stead; it celebrates the individual person and rejects their place as another number in a distressing statistic. In short, this book says, “Here is the truth, the good and the bad, directly from the mouths of the Puerto Rican people.”

To the teachers, consider the trauma and hurt that a student might carry with them to your classroom. Support them along their academic journey and allow them to heal as well as to learn from you. I hope that this book helps you reevaluate the importance of trauma-informed teaching in the classroom and encourages you to implement curricular work with the purpose of providing healing and meaningful experiences to your students. Encourage them to heal and inspire others through their work, break the cycle of trauma and create a cycle of healing and learning.

To the students, embrace the emotions contained within this book. Allow yourself to feel and empathize with the stories and their narrators and let their words inspire you to pursue similar work within your own community. The doors of oral history are open to everyone. Take yourself up for the task, speak to your neighbor, your parents, your teachers, find that story which you believe needs to be heard and through their words, inspire others to do the same. The world is at your fingertips, take the chance to learn, and to heal through the art of storytelling. You will find that the spoken word, through you, can and will shape the world as we know it.

From the sunny island of Puerto Rico,
Bryan Ramos Romero
Cartas de Nuestros Narradores

Bryan Ramos Romero y su padre, Rafael Ramos Díaz

“Nunca planeé compartir mi historia, pero me alegro de haberlo hecho. Tenía dudas porque muchas de las cosas que tenía que decir eran difíciles, desagradables y, a veces, francamente dolorosas. Pensé, “La gente no necesita saber o escuchar sobre esto. Es demasiado.” Me equivoqué. La gente necesita escuchar sobre esto. Necesitan saber lo que sucedió aquí y todas las cosas por las que nosotros, como puertorriqueños, pasamos por nuestro gobierno local, debido a nuestro gobierno federal y sus insuficiencias. Insuficiencias que costaron el bienestar y la vida de miles de inocentes, si no más. Se lo debemos a nuestra propia comunidad por la mayoría de las cosas buenas que sucedieron después del Huracán María.”

Rafael Ramos Díaz

Hace cuatro años, nuestro querido Puerto Rico sufrió uno de sus peores desastres naturales hasta la fecha: el huracán María. Las luchas posteriores con la electricidad, el gas, la comida y el refugio están impresas en nuestras mentes como un sombrío recordatorio de lo que fue y ya no es. En esos tiempos difíciles, lloramos, nos despedimos demasiado, pero también reímos y también sonreímos; nos elevamos más alto de lo que nunca pensamos que podríamos: nuestros narradores y sus historias abarcan esos tiempos en su totalidad.

Mi experiencia con la narrativa de mi padre fue impactante más allá de toda descripción. Fue un proceso arduo, como abrir una vieja herida y descubrir que todavía me dolía, pero en el fondo, después de cada sesión, pude ver el alivio en sus ojos y el efecto curativo que trajo hablar sobre esos traumas. Al final, y creo que hablo en nombre de muchos otros estudiantes en el proyecto Mi María, nosotros, como historiadores orales, sanamos y nos conectamos junto con nuestros narradores al final de (culminar) nuestro trabajo.

Este libro ocupa un lugar especial en mi corazón. Contiene las experiencias y emociones de primera mano del pueblo puertorriqueño provocadas por el huracán María. Denuncia dónde nuestro gobierno nos falló y destaca dónde nuestra comunidad tuvo éxito en su lugar; celebra a la persona individual y rechaza su lugar como otro número en una estadística angustiante. En resumen, este libro dice, “Aquí está la verdad, lo bueno y lo malo, directamente de la boca del pueblo puertorriqueño.”

Para los maestros, considere el trauma y el dolor que un estudiante podría llevar consigo a su salón de clases. Apóyalo a lo largo de su viaje académico y permiteles sanar y aprender de ti. Espero que este libro lo ayude a reevaluar la importancia de la enseñanza informada sobre el trauma en el aula y lo aliente a implementar el trabajo curricular con el propósito de proporcionar experiencias curativas y significativas a sus estudiantes. Animalos a sanar e inspirar a otros a través de su trabajo, romper el ciclo del trauma y crear un ciclo de curación y aprendizaje.

A los estudiantes, acepten las emociones contenidas en este libro. Permitete sentir y empatizar con las historias y sus narradores y deja que sus palabras te inspiren a realizar un trabajo similar dentro de tu propia comunidad. Las puertas de la historia oral están abiertas a todos. Tómate la tarea, habla con tu vecino, tus padres, tus maestros, encuentra esa historia que crees que necesita ser escuchada y, a través de sus palabras, inspira a otros a hacer lo mismo. El mundo está a tu alcance, aprovecha la oportunidad de aprender y sanar a través del arte de contar historias. Descubrirás que la palabra hablada, a través de ti, puede y dará forma al mundo tal como lo conocemos.

Desde la soleada isla de Puerto Rico,

Bryan Ramos Romero

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Mi María Lesson Plan: Climate Change & Colonialism (in Puerto Rico)

Time Needed: 4 class periods.

Materials:
1. Handouts and worksheets:
   ○ My Hurricane Checklist
   ○ My Emergency Network
2. Media and text:
   ○ NBC News article and video: “Puerto Rico Residents Outraged After Discovering Warehouse Full of Unused Aid from Hurricane Maria”
   ○ Fast Company article: “Why Puerto Rico Is Not Trump’s Katrina”
   ○ Vox article: “The Jones Act, the Obscure 1920 Shipping Regulation Strangling Puerto Rico, Explained”
   ○ Politico News article: “How Trump Favored Texas Over Puerto Rico”
   ○ Democracy Now video: “FBI Assassinates Puerto Rican Nationalist Leader Filiberto Ojeda Rios”
   ○ BBC News article: “Climate Change: Hurricanes Get Stronger on Land as World Warms”
   ○ CNN News article: “Laura ‘Rapidly Intensified’ Overnight. Here’s What that Term Means”
   ○ Phys.org article: “Climate Change to Blame for Hurricane Maria's Extreme Rainfall”
3. Full narrative from Mi María:
   ○ Zaira Arvelo Alicea

Objective:
- Students will learn about the connection between climate change and more severe storms and weather systems.
- Students will deepen their understanding of the connection between colonialism and disaster recovery in Puerto Rico.

Related Puerto Rico Department of Education Standards:

Essential Questions:
- What is the role of climate change in the current landscape of severe weather? How does climate change cause more severe storms?
- How might your home and community prepare for severe weather considering the climate and political context of Puerto Rico?
- What are the roles of colonialism and climate disasters in the lives of those who survive them?
Before diving into this lesson, we recommend reading over our Preface for Educators to better prepare your students for personal story sharing that may be challenging or overwhelming. Creating a trauma-informed classroom is key, and at Voice of Witness, we believe all activities should be designed for students to opt in when comfortable and opt out if they’re not yet ready. In this lesson, we ask students to reflect on their personal experience with Hurricane Maria, and our intention is that they will be open to learning from each other. However, please make space for students to reflect privately if preferred.

If your students are not from Puerto Rico or did not live through Hurricane Maria, encourage them to think of another emergency situation they have either personally experienced or are very familiar with to use in their discussions.

## Day One

### My Hurricane Experience (15 minutes)

**Step 1:** Have students reflect on the following questions individually: How did your family prepare for Hurricane Maria? Where did you stay?

**Step 2:** Group students in pairs to share as much of their hurricane experience as they are willing.

### Narrative Reading (20 minutes)

Have students read Zaira’s story, or just the section “Water was everywhere.” As they read, ask students to highlight passages that show Zaira and Juan Carlos’s hurricane preparedness plan.

### Preparedness in Aguadilla (15 minutes)

Encourage a whole class discussion on hurricane preparation using the following suggested questions:

1. What kinds of actions did Zaira and Juan Carlos take around the house prior to the hurricane to stay safe?
2. How was Zaira feeling the night before the hurricane?
3. How was she feeling the morning and afternoon of the hurricane?
4. Which aspects of her neighborhood, its geography, and home made her feel that way?

### Connections (10 minutes)

**Step 1:** On a prominent space (whiteboard, easel pad), write the prompt: “For the next one, I will...”

**Step 2:** Using sticky notes, ask students to respond to the question: “What would I do differently next time to be better prepared?” Have them suggest 1–2 actions they would take to fill in the prompt.

Remind students that this is not a judgment on their previous preparedness, and everyone did the best they could with the information they had for such an unprecedented event with little official warning. This activity is to encourage students to look forward and model this behavior for them by including an example of what you might do next time, knowing what you do now.
Extension: A Patriotic Month

These extension activities are meant to highlight the connections between climate change and colonialism, as well as provide students an opportunity to dive even deeper into Zaira’s narrative.

Step 1: Read the following paragraph from Zaira for context for your students:

I experienced Hurricane Maria on the west side of Puerto Rico, a coastal town with an active United States military base, but I grew up in a very different region: the rural center of the main island. As an extension activity, read my narrative section, “We’re with the people now” to learn more about what it meant for me to grow up in the town where the Cry of Lares originated. As you read, think about two important questions: How was my school experience different from others? What is so special about September 23 to me?

Step 2: Give students time to read Zaira’s narrative section, then come back for a whole group discussion about the meaning of September.

Day Two

Activating Prior Knowledge (5 minutes)

Divide students into small groups to have a conversation using the following prompt: “What was the official response in your community/home like?” This can mean the municipal government, Puerto Rico government and its agencies, or federal government and its agencies.

Narrative Reading (15 minutes)

Revisit Zaira’s story or just the following sections: “I am so freaking exhausted,” “Those girls were so brave,” “Those first weeks,” and “I went back.”

As they read, ask students to highlight passages that relate to official and unofficial responses and types of aid that Zaira, Juan Carlos, and their community received.

Whole Class Discussion (15 minutes)

Encourage a whole class discussion on hurricane response using the following suggested questions:

1. What was the official response to Zaira’s emergency like? Think of “officials” such as firefighters, police, and the government.
2. Who helped Zaira and Juan Carlos the day of the hurricane and the days immediately after the hurricane?
3. What was FEMA’s response to Zaira’s claim?
4. What was the federal response to the flood in Zaira’s community?
# The Worst Part Tally (5 minutes)

Create a simple poll with the prompt, “The worst part of Hurricane Maria was...” and the following options:

1. the hurricane itself (that day)
2. the aftermath (what came after it)

This can be a digital poll, having students raise their hands in response, or a T-chart on a white/blackboard that students can write their initials on. Tally their responses.

# Human-Made Disaster (20 minutes)

**Step 1:** As an introduction to this activity, emphasize that the natural disaster was scary and traumatizing, but the long aftermath was human-made and ultimately avoidable.

**Step 2:** Have students work in groups to read one of the following five articles.

1. “Puerto Rico Residents Outraged After Discovering Warehouse Full of Unused Aid from Hurricane Maria” (Expired supplies)
2. “Why Puerto Rico Is Not Trump’s Katrina” (Presidential apathy)
3. “The Jones Act, the Obscure 1920 Shipping Regulation Strangling Puerto Rico, Explained” (Jones Act effects on Puerto Rico)
5. “How Trump Favored Texas Over Puerto Rico” (Colonialism and double standards)

**Step 3:** As they read, encourage students to note the human actions, political relationships, transport regulations, and systems responsible for the long aftermath.

# Extension: A Premeditated September

**Step 1:** Read the following context from Zaira for students:

In the extension for Day 1, you read about my experience growing up singing an alternative revolutionary anthem in school and freely commemorating the anniversary of the Cry of Lares every September 23.

The meaning of this date is not lost to Lareños, boricuas, and the United States Intelligence Divisions. In fact, it was precisely on this date, on September 23, 2005, that the United States orchestrated an armed operative to assassinate Filiberto Ojeda, the head of the Ejército Popular Boricua (Boricua Popular Party).

When you watch the video “FBI Assassinates Puerto Rican Nationalist Leader Filiberto Ojeda Ríos,” think about the following questions: What kind of coordination was the FBI able to achieve in the rural community of Plan Bonito in Hormigueros? According to the video, what was the FBI’s intention on this day?

**Step 2:** Play the Democracy Now! video about Filiberto Ojeda Rios and facilitate a whole group discussion after watching together.
### Day Three

#### Climate Change and Severe Storms (20 minutes)

**Step 1:** Divide the class into three small groups and assign one article each:
1. "Climate Change: Hurricanes Get Stronger on Land as World Warms" (Longer inland spans)
2. "Laura 'Rapidly Intensified' Overnight. Here's What that Term Means" (Rapid intensification)
3. "Climate Change to Blame for Hurricane Maria's Extreme Rainfall" (Rain totals)

**Step 2:** As students read, have them annotate the factors causing longer storm life spans, faster intensification, and heavier rain totals.

**Step 3:** Create a classroom web where “Climate Change” is written at the top or center. Ask each group to add their weather phenomena to the web (e.g., longer storm life spans, faster intensification, heavier rain totals).

**Step 4:** Have a member of each group provide an explanation of exactly which aspects of climate change (e.g., heavy moisture, warmer water) are causing their assigned phenomenon.

#### Climate Change in Zaira’s Narrative (15 minutes)

Ask students to read from Zaira’s full story or the following sections: “Water was everywhere” and “I went back” (including editor updates). As they read, students should look for evidence of climate change in her story. While reading, students should consider the following question:
- What types of severe storm effects do you see in Zaira’s story?

#### Fighting Climate Change (20 minutes)

**Step 1:** Divide the class into small groups.

**Step 2:** Ask students to share: What were the biggest damages in your community? What surprised you after the hurricane?

**Step 3:** Assign or let students pick a region (e.g., coastal areas, rural/secluded regions, mountainous areas).

**Step 4:** Have students create a list that answers the following prompt: “Actions our community can take to be proactive against the dangers of climate change.”

#### Extension: The Meaning of September

**Step 1:** Read the following context from Zaira for students:

For me, September is meaningful in many ways. It is a month that brings up important childhood memories and the recurring dream of a free Puerto Rico. But for many Puerto Ricans, it is also a painful reminder of the violent attack of 2005 and how it proved that a nation fully capable of advanced logistical coordination in the Puerto Rican archipelago chooses to use their power only in certain ways. Still, for many other boricuas, September is less about armed events and more
about the weather, brought by the peak of the hurricane season. As I said in my narrative update, “I think that the body remembers. The third week of September will just always be a lousy week for anyone who survived Maria. Our human clock will feel it, always.”

I want you to think about what September has meant for me and my community, but I also want you to think about what it means to you. Maybe you’ve never really thought about September before. Now is your chance to think about what this time and place means to you moving forward.

**Step 2:** Ask students to produce an artistic and personal response in a medium of their choice (drawing, poetry, music, collage, etc.) using the prompt: “For me, September is...”

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**Day Four**

**My Hurricane Preparedness Checklist (15 minutes)**

Have students show the importance of individual preparedness in community recovery by working on their own hurricane preparedness checklist using My Hurricane Checklist as a template.

**Support in my Community (15 minutes)**

Ask students to conduct online research and incorporate their own experiences to produce a classroom list of local places and grassroots organizations that can help with basic needs. Use the collaborative table My Emergency Network:

1. Who helped your family/community during and after the hurricane?
2. Which places offer hot meals/fresh produce to your community?
3. Where can you get drinking water after an emergency?
4. Where can you get ice?
5. Where can you use a generator or solar power in your community/town?
6. Where are the nearest shelters located?
7. What are some community groups/networks you can rely on?

**Action Diagram (30 minutes)**

Have students co-create a chart by providing proactive actions for combating severe storms and addressing the human failures which exacerbate them by incorporating their notes from:

- Day Two’s activity “Human-Made Disaster” where they read about systemic issues relevant to Puerto Rico (poor relief coordination and distribution, priority restoration of touristic vs local residential barrios, controlled import of goods and essentials, heavy fossil fuel dependency)
- Day Three’s activity “Fighting Climate Change” in different geographical regions (urban, coastal, rural)
**Mi María: Discussion Questions**

1. In the introduction to *Mi María*, co-editor Ricia Anne Chansky says, “What is named ‘resilience’ is in actuality what occurs when a people are taught not to expect equitable treatment from their own government, developing a necessary understanding that they must be self-reliant in order to survive.” How does this theme resonate throughout the book?

2. Many of the narrators in *Mi María* express that the hurricane exacerbated problems related to Puerto Rico's colonial history. How did issues related to colonialism impact the US government’s response to Hurricane María?

3. Narrator Belle Marie Torres Veláquez mentions that “Life in Culebra is not for everyone.” What is she implying about this island-municipality and the people who live there? What does it say about the Puerto Rican archipelago generally, and the isolated and dependent experience of living on an island?

4. Many of the narrators in *Mi María* discuss how their relationships with family (bio-legal or chosen) play a significant role in their daily lives. How did these relationships influence their responses to the disaster and its aftermath, both for families on the Puerto Rican archipelago and the mainland US?

5. Narrator Carlos Figeroa Vázquez talks about the working conditions he experiences as an electric line worker before and after the hurricane. His story highlights the tension between frontline workers and the Puerto Rican power company, PREPA. What impact will the recent privatization of Puerto Rico’s power grid have on Carlos and other workers like him?

6. Narrator Zaira Arvelo Alicea talks about the young girls from a coserio (public housing project) that weren't taken seriously by the authorities when they insisted that Zaira and her partner Juan Carlos were trapped and needed help. How does this story illuminate the opportunities and challenges of how communities respond to natural disasters?

7. Narrator Windy Diáz Diáz says, “I felt forgotten. I was forgotten.” What were the major factors that contributed to Windy's isolation and how did she respond to them?

8. What are examples of cultural capital, strength, and familial/community support that you see amongst the narrators in *Mi María*?

9. Based on reading the first-person narratives in the book, how would you describe the relationship between the US Government and Puerto Rico? Do the citizens of Puerto Rico enjoy the benefits and privileges of “statehood,” are they treated as second-class citizens, or are they something in between?

10. What were your perspectives about Puerto Rico before reading *Mi María*? After reading the narratives, have your perspectives changed? If so, how does the oral history format in particular influence your changing perspectives?