

A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO

WHEN WE MAKE IT



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ABOUT THE BOOK

"THE ENERGY. THE CLARITY. THE BEAUTY. ELISABET VELASQUEZ BRINGS IT ALL. . . HER VOICE IS FIRE!"

—**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR**

JACQUELINE WOODSON

When We Make It is an unforgettable, torrential, and hopeful debut young adult novel-in-verse that redefines what it means to “make it,” for readers of Nicholasa Mohr and Elizabeth Acevedo.

Sarai is a first-generation Puerto Rican eighth-grader who can see with clarity the truth, pain, and beauty of the world both inside and outside her Bushwick apartment. Together with her older sister, Estrella, she navigates the strain of family traumas and the systemic pressures of toxic masculinity and housing insecurity in a rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn. Sarai questions the society around her, her Boricua identity, and the life she lives with determination and an open heart, learning to celebrate herself in a way that she has been denied.

When We Make It is a love letter to anyone who was taught to believe that they would not make it. To those who feel their emotions before they can name them. To those who still may not have all the language but they have their story. Velasquez’ debut novel is sure to leave an indelible mark on all who read it.



A NOTE TO EDUCATORS

Though Puerto Rico is in fact part of the United States, we have learned as a nation in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria that Puerto Rico and those living there are not awarded the same rights and protections as citizens living in other states. Not only are those living in Puerto Rico still living with power outages, housing shortages, and lack of basic necessities, they are still fighting for recognition and respect as American citizens—Puerto Ricans do not have representation in Congress and are not entitled to electoral votes for president of the *United States of America*. It is perhaps for these reasons there is such a clear and strong sense of Puerto Rican pride in areas with residents that are part of the Puerto Rican diaspora. *When We Make It* is as much about discovering what it means to identify as Puerto Rican as it is to survive or thrive in a society that has consistently and historically marginalized and erased Puerto Rican stories, people, and identities. Reading *When We Make It* is not only a move toward re-writing history through stories of the present, it is also a foot firmly planted “pa’ lante,” forward toward a future that is inclusive, loving, and boldly in the tradition of transformative resistance—honoring *all* that it means to be American.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS

1. Create a dictionary for all of the Puerto Rican words you will learn as you read this book. If you identify as Puerto Rican or of another group from the Latinx diaspora, you may already know some of these words. If you do not identify as Puerto Rican or of Latinx descent, you will need to learn new words using context clues or whatever resources are available to you. This could be anything from an [online dictionary of Puerto Rican Spanish](#) to your Wela (Abuela). Use what you have to grow what you know!

IT SAYS . . .	WHAT IT MEANS . . .	IN MY EXPERIENCE . . .
Ex. “It’s the best bochinche ever.” (41) IF BEING BORICUA IN BUSHWICK IS A FEELING—IT’S THE BEST KIND	Ex. According to Collins Dictionary, it seems like it is like “chisme” or gossip.	Ex. We usually use the word “chisme” and that’s because many people may know what it means.

2. Using CultureGrams, or any other database your school subscribes to, locate Puerto Rico. Familiarize yourself with the geography, principal landmarks, and most importantly, the history of Puerto Rico in connection with the mainland United States. Create an annotated timeline of events documenting the colonization of the island as well as current events and large periods of immigration (when Puerto Ricans left the island in large groups for other places). Where are some of the largest groups of Puerto Ricans outside of Puerto Rico? How do they celebrate their ethnic and cultural identity? Annotate your timeline using images, text, and where appropriate, lines from *When We Make It*.

This guide was written by Julia E. Torres. JULIA E. TORRES is a nationally recognized veteran language arts teacher-librarian in Denver, Colorado. Julia facilitates teacher development workshops rooted in the areas of anti-racist education, equity and access in literacy and librarianship, and education as a practice of liberation. Julia’s work has been featured on NPR, AlJazeera’s The Stream, PBS Education, KQED’s MindShift, Rethinking Schools, Learning for Justice Magazine, and many more. Her forthcoming co-authored title Liven Up Your Library will be published in 2022 by ISTE Publications. She is a current Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award committee member, a member of both the Book Love Foundation and ALAN boards of directors, an Educator Steering committee member, and a The Educator Collaborative Book Ambassador.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS CONTINUED

3. Who are Puerto Rican people? Create a [photo essay](#) with different pictures you can find online of Puerto Ricans. Amplify their stories using proper citation for all photos and quotes you find. Remember, the best photo essays present a position, defend the position with images, then conclude with an image that leaves readers curious for more information. Consider the following topics: Puerto Rican women, Puerto Rican LGBTQ+ families and communities, Puerto Ricans in New York (Nuyoricans), Black Puerto Ricans ([Why Some Black Puerto Ricans Choose “White” on the Census \(Published 2020\)](#))

4. *When We Make It* is a novel in verse. As such, you will read poems that address the following themes and topics: family, religion, sexuality, ethnic identity, “New Words” (language), history, love, “How We Got Our Names” (origin stories), and more. Classify poems that resonate with you, capture lines you like, and make connections between poems within and across categories. You may find it useful to use the following table:

THEME / TOPIC	POEM TITLE	KEY LINE(S)	ANALYSIS (WHAT THEY MEAN TO ME)
Family			
Identity			
Religion			
Sexuality			
New Words			
History			
Love			
“How we got . . .”			

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. What are the origins of Estrella's and Sarai's names? What is the origin of your name? Do you feel your personality has any connection to what people call you? Why or why not?
2. What does Sarai think of her neighborhood? How can you tell?
3. Is Sarai "poor"? Does she consider herself to be so? What clues does Sarai give about her family's economic situation?
4. What happened during the 1977 Blackout? Who in what neighborhood was most affected? Have you ever experienced anything like that?
5. What does Sarai think of housing insecurity? Does she consider herself "homeless"? (p. 64)
6. What differences in custom and styles of personal interaction can you detect between Sarai, her mother, and Brooklyn Wela? What clues does this give you about differences that might exist between first, second, and third-generation immigrants? Do you have personal experience with being an immigrant? If so, how does this shape the way you show up in the world?
7. What does **colorism** look like among Puerto Ricans in Sarai's neighborhood? (p. 77)
8. What is *Fiao* and how does it work to help those who may have less get by in a society that was not built for them to thrive? (p. 83)
9. Read the poem, "GOD'S NOT DEAD HE'S STILL ALIVE" (p. 87), then listen to "Juicy" by The Notorious B.I.G (1994) and consider the connections between Sarai's life and the life Christopher Wallace describes. Can you identify with anything from this experience? If so, what parts. If not, what privileges do you hold that Sarai and Biggie did not?
10. In "ERASURE" (p. 104) Sarai talks about a key component of colonization, forced assimilation and erasure. What does this look like in the area where you live? What **Indigenous lands** do you live on? What groups have lived there since?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

11. “YOUR SILENCE WILL NOT PROTECT YOU” (p. 127) alludes to poet, activist, and scholar [Audre Lorde](#). Research some of her writing with your peers as well as any of the poems in the section entitled “Poems in Conversation,” then annotate the poem you find using TPFAS (Title, Paraphrase, Figurative Devices, Attitude, Speaker, Theme). Then, write your own poem in conversation with one of the poems mentioned in *When We Make It*. Connect them by theme, tone, form, or by creating a [pastiche](#) or [blackout poem](#).
12. What does it mean to “[code switch](#)”? Do you ever do it? When? Why?
13. Is there a disconnect between how Bushwick is portrayed in the news by the outside world, and how Sarai experiences it? (pgs. 184–185)
14. How does Sarai see her mother? What do they have in common?
15. What is Sarai’s relationship to faith and religion?
16. How does the community react when she is assaulted? Consider the reactions of different people depending on proximity to her, as well as their relationship to her and bias against or toward women.
17. What is the relationship between fear and neighborhoods with statistically high crime rates?
18. Why doesn’t Sarai know Puerto Rican history?
19. Break down the metaphor she uses in “AN ENGLISH QUIZ I ACE” (p. 270), then write your own that connects the metaphor to your community.
20. Analyze the poem “RAID” (p. 274) or another poem of your choice to explain the challenges residents in Sarai’s neighborhood live with. Consider the way form follows function. How do the line breaks, punctuation, and stanzas contribute to the overall interpretation of the poem?
21. How does Sarai feel about being Boricua in Bushwick as the novel progresses? Find text evidence to support your answer.
22. Read “WHEN WE MAKE IT” (p. 331) and “WHAT IF MAKING IT LOOKS LIKE THIS” (p. 373) with a partner. You may choose to read them each separately, or together. Then, respond to the following essay prompt. What does it mean to “make it” in Sarai’s world? What does it mean to “make it” in yours?

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Create a poetry collection with at least one poem each from *When We Make It* matching the themes and essential topics explored in the book. If you choose, you may make visual art to accompany the poems. You may decide to host a slam poetry night, and invite members of your community to hear you read some of your favorite poems from *When We Make It*.
2. Research some of the singers or song titles Sarai mentions and create a playlist to match some of the moments from the novel that you feel capture the story. Create a document to accompany each of your songs with short explanations for why you chose each song. If the songs are in Spanish, highlight some of the lines that might mean the most to those who do not speak Spanish so that they can research them and learn as they listen.
3. In talking about *When We Make It*, Elisbaet Veleasquez has said that “poetry has a way to reveal the complex in the simplest form. One of the greatest poets of our time, Lucille Clifton, states poetry is about questions. Sarai’s inquisitive character trait is based on this framework. Much like Sarai, I spent my life questioning the rules, who made them, and what it meant for my survival if I did not follow them.” Create a series of questions you can answer with poems in *When We Make It*. Then, write your own unique poems that answer the questions. You can tie them to the themes listed above, ideas of rules, who makes them, lessons of life, death, or survival or identify ideas to explore that are important to you. Just think of your poems as an open door, ask the questions and invite people in to explore.
4. Read a few issues of *La Boriqueña*. What themes do you see that cross over? What did you learn about Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican people? How does this work expand your knowledge? How does it challenge what you thought you knew or confirm what you already know? Consider creating your own comic using a scene or poem from *When We Make It* or moments from your own life.

STANDARDS*:

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.5](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.6](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.7](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.8](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.9](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.10](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elisabet Velasquez is a Boricua writer born in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Her work has been featured in *Muzzle Magazine*, *Winter Tangerine*, *Latina Magazine*, *We Are Mitú*, *Tidal*, and more. She is a 2017 Poets House fellow and the 2017 winner of the Button Poetry Video Contest. Her work is featured in Martín Espada's anthology *What Saves Us: Poems of Empathy and Outrage in the Age of Trump*. Elisabet lives in Jersey City, New Jersey, and *When We Make It* is her debut novel.



Photo credit: Jonathan Rojas

PRAISE FOR *WHEN WE MAKE IT*

★ “A gem for pleasure reading as well as classroom use. . . . Raw, breathtaking, and brilliant.”

—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*, starred review

★ “Exquisite poetry portrays not only anger and fear, but also hope, as ‘making it’ may encompass a range of results . . . Gripping and soulful.”

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

“The energy. The clarity. The beauty. Elisabet Velasquez brings it all. . . . Her voice is FIRE!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author JACQUELINE WOODSON

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