

Black Powerful

A TEACHING COMPANION

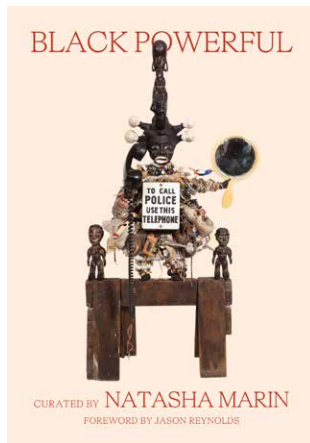
by Christopher Santo Domingo Chan
Department of Anthropology, University of Washington

CONTENTS

Ground Rules & Guidelines	1
Discussion Questions	2
Classroom Activities	5
Ideas for Research Projects	7

Ground Rules & Guidelines

A RITUAL FOR TEACHING THIS TEXT



Black Powerful compiles Black voices in response to radical questions about power, rootedness, origins, and the self. What makes this collection radical is that it centers Blackness—in all its diversity—in the project of claiming, naming, and locating power. This is doubly radical in most classrooms, where we have traditionally explored Blackness through the eyes of white protagonists and allies, or as distant historical observers. And at our worst, we have often gravitated towards stories where Black people are explicitly disempowered.

Open discussions about race, racism, whiteness, Blackness, and the hundreds of other subjects referred to in this book are never simple conversations, whether they occur in the world or in the classroom.

The educator has many ethical considerations to prepare in advance: every class contains mixed demographics, literacies around racial equity, aversions or appetites for risk-taking, and occasions for both tokenism and embodied authority. And even an all-white classroom taught by a white teacher requires these same considerations—as much as any other classroom.

You can scaffold these discussions by spending some time building consensus and buy-in from your students beforehand. *Black Powerful* inspires us to consider how different desires can be held together; collect the desires and anxieties of the class and establish shared ground rules students can commit to together when discussing and collaborating on projects related to this work. You may ask them to contribute such rules with these guiding questions, many inspired by the text itself:

- What do we want to learn here? How will we accomplish this?
- Why is it important to spend time exclusively centering Black voices, even if we are not all Black?
- What makes us feel safe, supported, and heard? How do we honor and acknowledge differences here?
- What worries us when we have conversations about race? What dissatisfies us about most conversations about race? What are common roadblocks?
- How do Black students want to engage with their peers and instructor? What responsibilities do non-Black students have in this conversation?
- What do we expect from our instructor? In what ways do we trust their authority to facilitate conversations around this text?
- How do we handle conflict, disagreement, and antagonism here? Can we establish a protocol that is fair and just to resolve these issues?
- How do we communicate and demonstrate respect and care for each other? How do we hold ourselves accountable for the goals we said we would accomplish together?

Discussion Questions

THEMATIC QUESTIONS

- What does the title of this collection, *Black Powerful*, connote? What is “powerful” according to the array of responses collected here? How does this collection challenge other kinds of “power” that occupy mainstream discourse (i.e., white power, buying power, institutional power, etc.)?
- What are some assumptions that are often made about Black communities at home, abroad, and in the diaspora that we can never claim again, having read *Black Powerful*? How can we put *Black Powerful* into conversation with some of these clichés to offer alternatives?
- *Black Powerful* contains voices from diverse Black people. Are there reappearing themes throughout this text? Do their individual entries contradict each other, or do a few seem to stand out as aberrations? How might we make sense of these differences—and why might the differences matter?
- In contemporary culture, we often hear the phrase “the Black experience.” But *Black Powerful* refuses to offer a singular account or definitive example of this “experience”; what is experienced (by the reader) instead?

BLACK JOY

- Take a look through the entries in this book: How many of them describe joy or elation? Why are narratives that center Black joy necessary in the world? What, according to the participants’ own voices, is so powerful about Black joy?
- Billy Weale’s entry (on pg. 81) describes the “relief” of being “in a room with mostly people who looked like you.” Myisha Jade Masterson and Taryn René Dorsey describe their trips to New Orleans as places where they “belong” (pg. 76) and “just Blackjoy personified” (pg. 77). Based on these and other entries in the collection, why does having Black spaces matter? Why are they special, rare, or precious?

REPRESENTATION AND RACE

- How has Black culture, community, or identity been represented in your classes or in other readings? How do these representations compare to the themes you recognize in *Black Powerful*?
- Think of a piece of literature or popular culture that centers Blackness. How are those stories told—are there protagonists and antagonists, central themes, or lessons? What happens if you juxtapose this work alongside *Black Powerful*?
- By now, we may anticipate a so-called “colorblind” or “post-racial” critique of stories, books, and other works that center Blackness, which claims that by emphasizing Blackness or Black voices, we are paradoxically reaffirming differences and perpetuating racism. How would you respond to these critiques, now that you’ve read *Black Powerful*? [*You may, for*

example, offer students concrete examples of these critiques from legislators, school boards, or other curricular “activists” who want to remove certain materials or discussions about race and racism from the classroom.}

SENSES, FORMS, GENRES

- In the introduction, Natasha Marin describes this project as a collection of “audio that I then translate into text because I want to convey actual people’s voices and not just data” (pg. 17). What is the difference between “voices” and “data,” and where do we find examples of either? What are the cultural, political, or social consequences of the transcription of a person’s voice into data? How have we (as readers) been trained to think of *listening*, as opposed to *reading* or *writing*—which do we consider more trustworthy or authoritative, and why?
- What do you notice about *Black Powerful*’s participants’ invocation of the senses throughout the book—particularly the nonvisual, nonverbal senses of taste, olfaction, and sound? What do these tastes, smells, and sounds communicate for the book’s participants? Do the senses interrupt, contradict, or complicate the spoken or written language that is used to describe identity, race, or culture?
- How are the entries for *Black Powerful* organized? Are they written in the same style or not? Can you identify a storyline, an exposition, a rising action, or characters, as you may have been trained in your own literary education? How did you feel as a reader when you picked up this text? Which conventions does *Black Powerful* interrupt—and what are the effects of this interruption?
- How do you understand the *interludes* that punctuate the responses of *Black Powerful*? What about the final *coda*? What do the musical references do for the reader, who is engaging in this book through text?

ROOTED/INDIGENOUS

- As you read through the entries in this section (pg. 21 onward), do you notice patterns or exceptions in the respondents’ answers to the question “When do you feel most rooted/indigenous”? How many of them describe a physical place, a spiritual or metaphysical place, or something else entirely? How do their responses square with (or contest) the dictionary’s definition of *indigenous*?
- Erika Hardaway’s entry (pg. 35) says: “We do not simply exist in the context of white folks’ perceived supremacy.” Reading through Hardaway’s entry, how would you describe or define the “context of white folks’ perceived supremacy”? What alternatives to this context can you identify in Hardaway’s entry or in other entries?
- How do these entries describe family members, living or ancestral? How do these voices connect genealogy, relation, and family to the sense of rootedness—and are these forms of kinship described here differently than in mainstream culture or media?

BLACK POWERFUL

- What is significant about the question posed at the beginning of this selection (“When do you feel most powerful,” pg. 133)? Where, if anywhere, have you heard this question posed specifically to Black respondents? What does it feel like to read a series of these responses, given your own position in the world?
- As you read through this section, from which sources do the respondents derive their power? How does this compare to mainstream, corporate, or otherwise clichéd messages about empowerment? What do you think explains the differences?
- There are a range of responses throughout the book—some of the entries are resolutely empowered and commanding; some (like Amber A. Doe’s, pg. 179) are vulnerable about *not* feeling powerful. What do you think we have to learn from those who are ambivalent or unsure of their own power? Why does their inclusion in this collection matter, and what can we learn from reading them in the context of the others?
- Many of the entries here discuss community, family, and interpersonal relations as necessary for claiming power. Does this contradict messages about power we hear elsewhere that focus on individualism, competition, talents, or strategy? Why?

CLAIMED/NAMED

- How do you understand the question posed on pg. 213: “What does it sound like when you claim yourself”? Why does this question use the word *sound*, rather than the word *look*? What kinds of answers does this question give us as readers, and how should we consider them in their diversity—rhythms, songs, laughter, or silence, for example?
- What is the connection between the two words in this section’s title: *claimed* and *named*? How do the respondents address either or both of these words in their responses?

REPRISE: IMAGINE

- Think about the prompt posed to the collection’s participants at the beginning of this section: “Describe or imagine a world where you are loved, safe, and valued.” How often do we—the general public, the mainstream, non-Black audiences, schools, or workplaces—ask this question? What does it mean to read this collection of responses as students or teachers?
- Based on what you’ve read here, what are some small interventions that you think you can realistically make—in your own communities, among your own friends and family, or even here at school—that can help realize what has been imagined here? What are bigger, or more ambitious, interventions that you think we can start making? (You might choose one entry, for example, as a place to start thinking about a concrete response.)

Classroom Activities

GALLERY WALK

Learning outcomes:

- Confront the politics and possibilities of building an archive
- Consider the intersectional dimensions within a community
- Develop interpersonal and communicative skills around consensus-building and consent

Procedure:

1. *Black Powerful* is a sequel to *Black Imagination*, which was first curated as a series of exhibitions in Seattle, Washington, wherein visitors navigated a physical space and encountered recordings of the project's participants' responses to three major questions. In this activity, we'll also build a gallery of student responses to a prompt and allow ourselves time to explore this collection spatially. First, ask the students to consider the classroom as its own community—with its own intersectional dimensions—that now has an opportunity for its members to say whatever they wish. Ask students to decide among themselves: What do we (the class) need to collectively (re-)imagine at this moment in time? What is a prompt that can elicit a unique and imaginative response?
2. Students discuss among themselves what issue, question, or problem their gallery will address, and will decide on a single prompt. As facilitator, you might take notes on how these decisions were made, and whose voices were the most persuasive—these observations may be framed as questions for the class to consider after the activity is completed.
3. Give everybody some time to freewrite a response to the prompt. When they're ready, have them tape or pin their responses to the wall in the classroom or hallway in a consecutive line. (Submissions may either be anonymous or have names attached.)
4. Allow everybody to peruse the gallery and read their classmates' responses.
5. After everyone has had a chance to explore the gallery, debrief the experience with a conversation about their perspectives. Questions may include: What surprised you about this installation? Do some voices appear more prominently than others—and if so, why? How were decisions made in the planning of the gallery? Did we accomplish our objectives as a community? Which voices did we want to hear more from?

VISUAL CULTURE: GROUP COLLAGE

Learning outcomes:

- Understand how pervasive stereotypes and myths about Blackness are reproduced in visual culture and the media—and why alternatives like *Black Powerful* are so necessary
- Develop critical thinking about media messages and racial representation

Procedure:

1. Ask students to collect physical clippings of Black people from magazines and other publications, printouts of social media content, frames from TV news or entertainment programming, stories about athletes, politicians, or other celebrities, etc. Advise them that this content may be problematic or unsettling. (This can be assigned as homework in preparation for class time.)
2. In small groups, prompt students to begin organizing their visual archive into categories or groupings—as piles or clusters. What do we begin to see? (We may see tropes like victimhood, criminality, hypersexuality, animalism, or the like.) Take a photo of these piles.
3. Now, ask students in the same groups to pick selections from *Black Powerful* that are particularly meaningful to them for their imaginative capacity. After re-reading these selections, come up with *new* categories to visualize Blackness that are faithful to the contributors' words.
4. Students then reorganize their clippings to do justice for their new categories. Authorize them to cut out words or parts of images, refashion or collage images into new messages, or draw new images altogether. This time, commit the collage to posterboard using glue.
5. Let students present their work, and hold up the photographs of the categories from step 2.
6. To debrief, facilitate a conversation about the experience. Which clippings could be repurposed? Were the clippings inadequate to visualize the language in the book? What explains the gap between the media images and the imaginations of the *Black Powerful* contributors? And now that we've completed the exercise, how can we imagine new television programs, TV news reports, magazine editorials, and other visual content wherein Black people are loved, safe, and valued?

Research Projects

BLACK BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Black Powerful invites us into a generative experience that completely centers Black voices. It also invites us to consider other places where voices are collected: a research bibliography is one such place. In this research project, students confront the racial politics of citation in the search for knowledge—and the possibilities of imagining a version of the arts, sciences, social sciences, and humanities that values Black scholars’ questions, methods, and theories.

Learning outcomes:

- Familiarize ourselves with citational practices, library and database resources, and building a research archive
- Develop critical questions to ask of authoritative sources, curricular traditions, and commonly accepted knowledge
- Explore underrepresented epistemologies, methods, and modes of questioning

Assignment:

- Select a research paper (with a bibliography or works cited page) that you have already written for this class or prior class. [*You may consider encouraging students to choose a paper in the STEM disciplines or subjects that are not about “social” issues, or a paper in a less diverse field like classics or astrophysics.*]
- Consider the paper’s original research question, the sources that were consulted to support the thesis, and its conclusions.
- Addressing the original research question, begin a new annotated bibliography that intentionally centers only Black authors and scholars. What resources will you use to identify your new sources? [*You may suggest some places students can consult: library resources, bibliographies of recent publications, syllabuses, Black affinity groups within scholarly professional organizations, or the #CiteBlackWomen hashtag on Twitter, for example.*]
- For each entry in the annotated bibliography, briefly describe the source, how it advances the research question, and how it may be used in your research.
- [Optional:] Write a new version of your paper using your new sources.
- Reflect upon your experience drafting this bibliography in an essay, presentation, or a conversation with your classmates.
- Guiding questions:
 - Was this exercise challenging? Why? How did you address these challenges?
 - Are there any noteworthy differences in perspective, methodology, or approach when you compare the two versions of your paper? What knowledge is made possible in either version?
 - What new questions do you have about your old research topic? New curiosities?

- What explains the marginalization or minimization of Black contributions to the development of this subject? What are actionable solutions to this problem?
- *Black Powerful* explicitly constructs an archive of Black voices. As a research activity, does your new annotated bibliography expand your own imagination of the subject?

ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWING

The fragments that compose *Black Powerful* were collected first in audio form; in juxtaposition and as a collection, these varied recordings illustrate larger themes as the reader begins to identify patterns between the individual contributors. For this project, we will conduct a research project that relies on the human voices we record instead of books, articles, or other print sources. Along the way, we will consider the ethical implications of our research design, our questions, and the ways we render our findings.

Learning outcomes:

- Practice ethnography through interviewing
- Underscore the ethical dimensions of representing research subjects

Assignment:

- Ethnography is a research method that describes the customs and beliefs of a group of people. Using interviews, we'll be conducting an ethnography that addresses a research question about a community (big or small) of our choosing.
- Form a small group for the duration of this project. Together, pick a specific research question of interest to your collaborators. Then, think about which people you all will interview, how many people will be included in your archive, and how you will record their responses. (You may consider an online submission form, field recordings, asking participants to share video on a unique hashtag, etc.)
- As a group, write a collective agreement that can be shared with your interviewees when asking for their consent. It should describe: the research question, your intentions, and an idea of how their submissions will be included or interpreted.
- *Black Powerful* asked its participants to respond in their own voice to a set of prompts. Together, choose three questions that are open enough to a wide array of responses, but specific enough to address your research question.
- Conduct your interviews and transcribe or organize them together. (You can split up the labor of interviewing and transcribing between the group members.)
- Once you have an archive of responses, spend some time together identifying patterns and anomalies within the ethnographic data. Do certain submissions stand out, or provide insight for other entries? Is there consensus or wide disagreement between interviewees? Turn these observations into claims about your research question.
- Group members break off to write their own research paper. Respond to your collective

research question by developing your own thesis statement, and use selections from the archive as supporting evidence.

- Share copies of your essay with your group members; read theirs. Then have a discussion about the various approaches you took as individuals by using material from a shared archive.

Guiding questions:

- Based on our final papers, did we fulfill our original agreement with our interviewees?
- How did we manage to make definitive statements from responses that may have been mixed? How did we account for contradicting or anomalous interviews? Whose stories seemed more appealing, interesting, or legible? Whose stories were not included in our analysis? Why?
- Would we share our final papers with our interviewees? If this seems uncomfortable, why?
- Did our research design (picking a research question, interview questions, and recruitment efforts) influence or limit the answers we heard? Did any of the interviewees' responses challenge our research design?
- Why did we have similar, or dissimilar, approaches and conclusions in our individual papers?
- What kind of knowledge is gleaned from conversation and listening, rather than consulting written texts? What are the limits and possibilities of this knowledge?

Praise for Black Imagination

“*Black Imagination* reads like a survival guide with a sense of humor as deep as its sense of history, a literary oasis for black people fed up with the white gaze.”

—*The Stranger*

“Our bodies and actions are under external control, but the wellspring of rebellion is our own imagination. In *Black Imagination*, Natasha Marin shows us how to free our imagining—as a first step toward freeing ourselves.”

—Gloria Steinem

“*Black Imagination* is somehow as innovatively utopic as it is sincerely soulful. I’ve never felt the physical feeling of pages melting in my hands or chapters folding themselves into squadrons of black airplanes flying to freedom because I’ve never experienced an art object like *Black Imagination*. It is exquisite art in action.”

—Kiese Laymon, author of *Heavy*

“Have you ever read a book and realized you’re reading something you didn’t know you needed? This is not a book to simply read in total and digest—yes, do that—but it is also a work to return to in parts whenever necessary. It’s a book to ingest like medicine, because it is that. Lastly, it is a reminder that joy, too, is necessary and also a form of resistance.”

—Rion Amilcar Scott,
author *The World Doesn’t Require You*

“In an age where spirituality has a price-tag and crystals, teas, and sage reign supreme, this book is a welcome rebuttal. *Black Imagination* shakes us out of our cultural trance and reminds us that so much of what we deem to be true is learned, and so much of what is actually true has to be remembered. With the storytelling talent of Griot tradition this book is required reading for the African diaspora.”

—Akilah Hughes, author of
Obviously: Stories from My Timeline
and host of Crooked Media’s *What a Day*



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