

Black Imagination

A TEACHING COMPANION

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Ground Rules & Guidelines

A RITUAL FOR TEACHING THIS TEXT



Black Imagination is a compilation of Black voices engaged in the radical act of imagining alternatives, origins, and pathways to healing. As a book, its form expands our senses and affects while its plural contributors challenge our often limited imagination of what Blackness is and can be. For this reason, it is more than worthy of its place on any reading list across the disciplines and all curricular subjects.

That's not to say, of course, that open discussions about race, racism, whiteness, Blackness, and the hundreds of other subjects referred to in this book are ever simple conversations 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 Imagination* 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

IMAGINATION & IMAGINING

- In an on-air radio interview with KUOW (<https://www.kuow.org/stories/what-does-ballet-mean-to-you>), Natasha Marin described a common observation amongst the interview participants in *Black Imagination*: “What I didn’t expect was to ask a question that was difficult to answer... just sitting down to imagine a better world was a bit of a struggle itself.” Why might the work of imagining alternatives be so challenging for these participants--or even for ourselves?
- *Black Imagination* compiles a set of imaginings from a diverse group of Black people around the world. What--if any--themes seem to reappear throughout their contributions to the project? Are any of their imaginings contradictory? Do any stand out as anomalous? How might we account for these differences?
- Let’s discuss the title of this project, *Black Imagination*. The word *imagine* is related to the word *image*--a visualization or conjuring of ideas, scenes, or affects not present to the senses. What, then, is implied about the White Imagination, or other kinds of imaginations (the Male Imagination, or the American Imagination, for example)? How are different peoples’ imaginations valued or codified into reality--or ignored altogether? What political, social, or psychological potential is unlocked by curating the imaginations of Black people?

HEALING

- Pages 94-145 compile responses to the question: “how do you heal yourself?” Based on these responses and what you can infer about them, which wounds or traumas are these healing methods addressing? Which wounds are historical, and which are embedded in personal experiences--and is there a categorical difference between the two?
- Make a list of peoples’ healing methods mentioned in this section (like watching *Grey’s Anatomy* and eating peaches [pg 123] or addressing a letter to a stranger who has given a dirty look [pages 145-146,] for example.) If we were to categorize these healing strategies, what patterns do we observe?

ORIGINS

- The first question (of three) that the project’s interviewers asked was: “What is your origin story?” (page 11.) Why is this question about origins so central to *Black Imagination*? What potential is invoked when people in the Black diaspora tell their own origin stories? What narratives are challenged by their articulation?
- What are commonplace origin stories we tell ourselves? (For example: the Pilgrims’ landing at Plymouth Rock, Columbus’ “discovery” of America, the establishment of the French Republic, the birth of Rock n’ Roll, the evolution of the human species, etc). Can we say that these stories are also *imagined*? Whose imagination authored these stories, and with what authority have they been entered into the historical, cultural, or scientific record? What are the effects of these origin stories on us today?

RITUALS

- What is a ritual, and in what contexts are rituals performed? What do rituals afford the people who perform them? What are commonplace rituals we perform in our faith communities, or more secular environments like school, work, or amongst friends and family? What do these rituals tell us about our own social, class, gender, or racial positions in society?
- Why are *Black Imagination*'s major chapters punctuated by interludes composed of rituals? What do these rituals afford us as readers and listeners? Are these rituals explicitly for Black audience members?

REPRESENTATION & RACE

- Who was the last Black author you read in class? What themes did you notice or discuss amongst your classmates? Do these themes align with the themes you observe in *Black Imagination*?
- Can you think of another piece of literary or cultural work (including media pieces like film, television, or art) that centers Blackness? What methods are used to tell these stories? If so, how can we compare the results of these works in juxtaposition with the interviews in *Black Imagination*?
- Blackness is often described in monolithic terms (think of the phrase “the Black experience,” for example.) How similar or dissimilar are the entries in *Black Imagination*? Why might it be important to understand major differences in perspective, opinion, or focus between these entries?
- *On intersectionality*: In her introduction, Natasha Marin writes that the project’s collaborators “...agreed to collect sound from black folks of all kinds, and craving nuance over stereotype, we sought out black children, black youth, LGBTQ+ black folks, unsheltered black folks, incarcerated black folks, neurodivergent black folks, as well as differently-abled black folks.” (page 11.) Why did they specifically seek these contributors? What do we have to learn from underrepresented or marginalized people, in particular? And what do we learn when we read their words in juxtaposition?

ARCHIVES IN ACTION

- An archive is a collection of documents, recordings, photographs, or other material that preserve and display information about a subject, a place, an institution, or a group of people. Libraries, government databases, and museums are examples of archives. Family photo albums, group text messages, and time capsules could also be considered informal archives. How do these archives, big or small, inform our collective imagination about history? How do archival choices (which materials to preserve or exclude) shape this historical imagination? With the understanding that *Black Imagination* began as an archive of recordings, what dominant or white supremacist narratives are interrupted or challenged?
- Let’s consider archives that we consult everyday: Google (and Google Image Search), Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, Netflix, and other platforms deliver and curate content

for us via algorithmic technology. Who is curating this content? What considerations are they making? And what are the consequences when these platforms display content that represents Black people? What kinds of representations do we see, and what are the effects of those representations?

GENRES, FORMS, AND CONTEXTS

- How are the entries in *Black Imagination* organized? Are there central voices, or are these entries decentralized? How does this compare with other narrative forms, like a novel, a historical text, a mainstream film, or a documentary? How did you feel when reading in this format? What does *Black Imagination* thus capture about reality, lived experience, and social relations that other linear forms of storytelling cannot?
- *Black Imagination* began as an audio project, and the recordings were played in a series of exhibitions as guests walked blindfolded through space. In print, the chapters are organized into movements (“Imagine,” “Healing,” and “Origins”) with *interludes* and a *coda* of rituals. By invoking the language of musical composition, and with the understanding that this project is also an audio archive, we are prompted to engage with these fragments as listeners. Why does listening matter, and how is it different from other forms of engaging and knowing information (like reading text, watching news footage, or sharing memes, for example)? What is the potential power or perils of engaging senses other than vision in works about our differences?
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Classroom Activities

VISUAL CULTURE: GROUP COLLAGE

Learning outcomes:

- Understand how pervasive stereotypes and myths about Blackness are reproduced in visual culture and the media
- 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 Imagination* that are particularly powerful 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 Imagination* 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?

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 Imagination* 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 amongst themselves: what do we (the class) need to collectively (re-)imagine in this moment in time? What is a prompt that can elicit a unique and imaginative response?
2. Students discuss amongst 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 on 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 with 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?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Learning outcomes:

- Confront snap judgments, stereotypes, and anti-Black messages we have internalized

Procedure:

1. *Black Imagination* compiles a diverse body of Black voices to share in a project that reframes Blackness as vast, generative, and imaginative. Yet the selections in the book are often quite short--glimpses into the perspectives of people we don't know much about (other than their name and place of residence). Assign everyone in class their own selection from the *Imagine*, *Healing*, and *Origins* portion of the book.
2. Set aside some time for students to re-read their assigned selection. Then, ask students to speculate about the person that authored their selection. What is the first image of this person when you read their work? How old are they? What do they do for work? For fun? What pronouns do they use? What might they look like? Ask students to do this speculative work in a list of bulletpoints or a brief pseudo-biographical sketch.
3. *Optional:* have students share their speculations verbally with a partner.
4. Then, ask students to flip to page 216 to find their author's biography. After reading, engage students in a discussion about anything they might have found surprising or unexpected. What assumptions did we make? What biases may have informed these assumptions? What are biographical facts that we were not able to anticipate? Why couldn't we anticipate them? Were we challenged when asked to begin speculating? If so, why?

Research Projects

BLACK BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Black Imagination 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 Imagination* 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 Imagination* were collected by Black women on field recorders; 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, 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 Imagination* asked its participants to respond to three uniform questions (see page 11). 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?

“*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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