

WE ARE OWED.

Teachers' Guide



We Are Owed. by Ariana Brown
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98 pages

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Ebook & Print Book

(Audiobook coming soon)

Key Themes:

- Race, Ethnicity, & Migration
- Belonging
- Imperialism
- U.S. and Mexican Nationalism
- Texas History
- Mexican Colonial History
- African slavery in Mexico
- African and African Diaspora

We Are Owed. is the debut poetry collection of Ariana Brown, exploring Black relationality in Mexican and Mexican American spaces. Through poems about the author's childhood in Texas and a trip to Mexico as an adult, Brown interrogates the accepted origin stories of Mexican identity. *We Are Owed.* asks the reader to develop a Black consciousness by rejecting U.S., Chicano, and Mexican nationalism and confronting anti-Black erasure and empire-building. As Brown searches for other Black kin in the same spaces through which she moves, her experiences of Blackness are placed in conversation with the histories of formerly enslaved Africans in Texas and Mexico. Esteban Dorantes, Gaspar Yanga, and the author's Black family members and friends populate the book as a protective and guiding force, building the "we" evoked in the title and linking Brown to all other African-descended peoples living in what Saidiya Hartman calls "the afterlife of slavery."

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In Pelaez Lopez's Foreword, how do they frame this collection of poetry? What does Pelaez Lopez praise about Brown's work? Why do they believe that this collection "opens portals" and makes the reader begin to "imagine futures otherwise"? In what ways do they challenge the reader to confront anti-Blackness?
- Pelaez Lopez also suggests that "relation" is another keyword that organizes Brown's text. What argument do they give to support this claim and what other types of relation does the collection suggest that are not named in the foreword?
- Why might Brown title the first poem in the collection, "At the End of the Borderlands"? Compare to Anzaldúa's "To live in the Borderlands means you..." from *Borderlands: the new mestiza*. How are these messages different from one another?
- What is the significance of the Latin American board game *lotería* to the book as a whole?
- What distinguishes the separate parts of "Aguacate"? Why do you think Brown chose to write a concrete poem for this subject?
- Why does Brown include historical information between poems? If they were not there, how would the collection change?
- Why did Brown choose different forms for each section of the poem "Mustang"? How do they contribute to the overall meaning of the poem?
- The text of "Case Study" is justified right throughout the poem. How does this relate to the poem's content?
- As Brown narrates her experiences in Mexico City and recalls moments from her childhood, what are some of the frustrations that she highlights? In which ways does the author express that she feels disconnected from Latinidad?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, CONTINUED

- In the poem “Field Notes,” Brown is not recognized as Mexican while on her study abroad trip and she also reacts to classmates who claim that they did not even know Afromexicanos existed. How has mexicanidad historically been constructed according to these poems? Which voices have been systemically erased from the national imagination? How?
- How does Brown ask the reader to interrogate mestizaje?
- Who is Yanga and why is this figure important historically to Brown? Why might Brown invoke this figure as a pillar upon which she begins to construct identity, meaning, and history? Why does she promise to “look for Yanga everywhere”?
- “Why I Want to Know What Yanga Looked Like” is one long run-on sentence. How does the form affect how you read the poem?
- In the poem ‘Borderlands Suite: Names,’ the author explains what it means to be both “Brown” and Black: “Brown in the name of a slave owner. Brown is a color. Brown is the color of some of my family, not all. Black is also my color. Black is also my allegiance. I am Black but I am not dark-skinned. Brown does not mean dark skin. Black power is my allegiance. Black is not my name but it is my condition. I am proud to be Black. Black Power is fundamental.”
 - How does Brown challenge the reader to confront and challenge the ways in which we may traditionally think about each of these categories?

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RECOMMENDED PAIRINGS

BOOKS

Intergalactic Travels: poems from a fugitive alien by Alan Pelaez Lopez
A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging by Dionne Brand
Recovering History, Constructing Race by Martha Menchaca
The Black Maria by Aracelis Girmay
Horsepower by Joy Priest
Brazilian is Not a Race by Wendy Treviño

ARTICLES & POEMS

"The X in Latinx is a Wound, Not a Trend" by Alan Pelaez Lopez
"Troubling the Essentialist Discourse of Brown in Education: The Anti-Black Sociopolitical and Sociohistorical Etymology of Latinxs as a Brown Monolith" by Christopher L. Busey and Carolyn Silva
"To Live in the Borderlands Means You" by Gloria Anzaldúa

FILM & VIDEO

Heroes of Color: Yanga episode
Negro: A Docu-Series About Latinx Identity by Dash Harris Machado
Jamaica Y Tamarindo: Afro-Tradition in the Heart of Mexico by Ebony Bailey
Life Between Borders: Black Migrants in Mexico by Ebony Bailey

AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

New Books Network Interview with Jonathan Cortez
We Are Owed. Official Press Interview with Jacqui Germain

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ACTIVITIES & ASSIGNMENTS

1. Search online for images of the board game *lotería*. Note the game's use of color and names. Then, create your own *lotería* images for your own characters or the characters described in the book (*La Prima*, *La Tía*, *La Angelita*, and *La Bisabuela*).
2. Before reading *We Are Owed.*, write a one-page reflection about your knowledge of slavery and/or Latin American history. After reading the book, write a two-page reflection detailing your new knowledge about the topic(s) and anything you were surprised to learn.
3. Return to Pelaez Lopez's Foreword and note how they describe specific themes and influences in Brown's work. Now, pick two keywords that are not in the Foreword and write entries on how these keywords develop in the collection. For example, "Gender": How is gender introduced, critiqued, departed from, extended, etc. through the collection?
4. Pick a book from the Selected Reading list at the end of *We Are Owed.* Develop a creative or academic project in which you discuss the two texts in conversation.
5. Write a poem about a place that is important to you, or that you have a complicated relationship with. Use a photo of that place as your inspiration.
6. Write a poem in the form of a long, run-on sentence. Use punctuation (dashes, colons, semicolons, etc.) to interrupt and clarify your thought. Consider beginning your poem with the word "If."

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