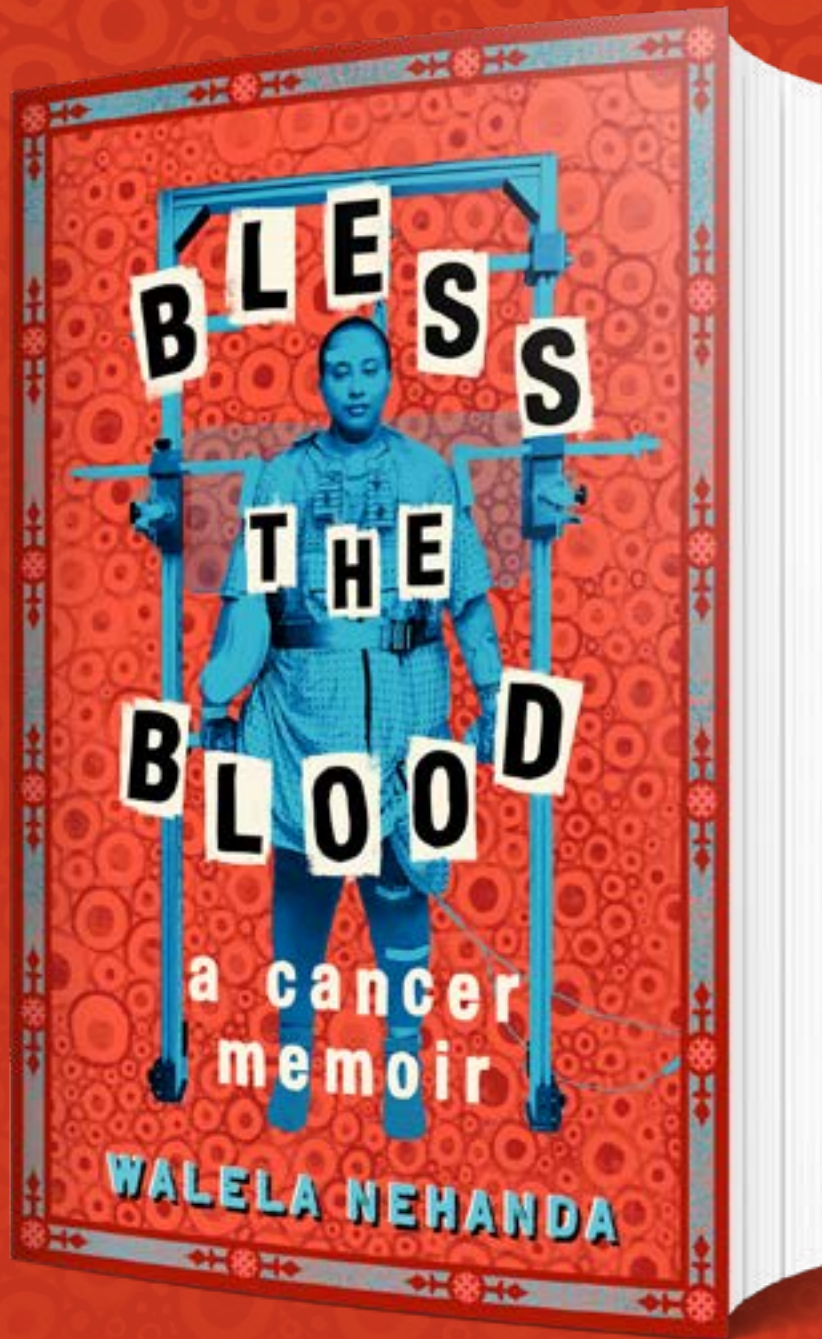


# A Classroom Discussion & Engagement Guide to



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COVER DESIGN BY KRISTIE RADWILOWICZ





**"INFUSES QUEER BLACK  
DISABLED RESILIENCE AND  
WRETCHEDNESS INTO A POETIC  
SINEW THAT STRETCHES,  
TEARS, AND HEALS AGAIN  
AND AGAIN."**

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review



**"A FORCEFULLY CRAFTED  
COLLECTION."**

—*Publishers Weekly*,  
starred review



**"CATHARTIC [AND]  
REVELATORY."**

—*Booklist*, starred review



**"CAPTIVATING."**

—*Shelf Awareness*, starred review



**"SHOULD BE IN EVERY  
CLASSROOM LIBRARY."**

—The Poetry Question

**AN ALA  
RAINBOW  
BOOKLIST  
SELECTION**

**AN NCSS REV. DR.  
PAULI MURRAY  
BOOK AWARD HONOR  
SELECTION**

**AN ILA YOUNG  
ADULT BOOK  
AWARD WINNER**

## ABOUT THE BOOK

**A searing poetry and essay collection about a Black cancer patient who faces medical racism after being diagnosed with leukemia in their early twenties.**

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

**witness (transitive verb):**

**to attest, which means to affirm to be true or genuine**

In the writer's note that begins *Bless the Blood*, Walela Nehanda promises readers "no happy endings"; instead, their memoir "just. is. a witnessing" (p. 2). This witnessing is twofold. Nehanda's memoir in verse is, in fact, a product of their own attestation of their battle with cancer, deservedness of, and aliveness. In place of happy endings, Nehanda's poems are an invitation to join the witnessing—they are a call to grapple with the realities of Nehanda's battle with leukemia, navigation of the medical industrial complex, and intricacies of doing life as a twenty-something Black disabled nonbinary queer poet.

Like every step of Nehanda's journey, this book is necessary, nuanced, and heavy—demanding that we treat it (and ourselves) with the utmost tenderness and care. The following engagement guide includes discussion questions, reflection prompts, and activities designed to hold you as you reckon with the intersections and complexities of Nehanda's journey. While this guide was crafted for community/classroom engagement, the questions and prompts can certainly be used while reading independently.

This book ain't for the faint of heart—but neither is being Black and disabled in America, battling leukemia, healing generational trauma, fighting the government for the care you deserve, or living in a world not designed for you.

**Read it.**

**Discuss it.**

**Teach the poems.**

**Hold the words tightly.**

**Take Nehanda's invitation to witness seriously.**

**And above all, take good care of yourself and your people while doing so.**

**We all deserve it.**



## “PRE-READING” CONSIDERATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

*Bless the Blood* is a gripping memoir that encourages intentional and authentic dialogue around identity, community, sickness, healing, and systemic violence. Given the topics discussed in the book, we recommend that teachers/group leaders invest heavily in cocreating a strong community culture as a part of pre-reading engagement.

### Suggested Activities and Resources for Community Building

- **Resource:** [Let's Talk! Toolkit](#): Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students (Learning for Justice)
- **Resource:** [Contracting \(Facing History & Ourselves\)](#)
- **Engage:** Try a “Getting to Know You” activity using [Concentric Circles](#).

#### ❖ Pre-Reading Activity: Creating a Parking Lot of Wonder and Critique

*Bless the Blood* is rich with medical vocabulary, processes, textual and historical references, pop culture, and cultural experiences that might ignite readers’ wonder and critique. Before you begin reading in community, consider cocreating a community “Parking Lot of Wonder and Critique” with your students or discussion group. This “parking lot” can be a physical anchor chart where community members (students and teachers) place Post-it notes or even a collaborative online tool (like Padlet) where community members have autonomy to add wonderings and critical thoughts as they arise. As you’re developing this “Parking Lot,” we encourage all readers to add to it (even teachers!). Teacher engagement in the activity helps students understand the importance of critically engaging with text, self, and the world, regardless of one’s expertise, experiences, or age. As you read, allow “Parking Lot of Wonder and Critique” to be a springboard to important reflection, connections, and dialogue in community.

#### ❖ Pre-Reading Activity: Creating a K-W-L Chart

*Bless the Blood* documents Nehanda’s journey with leukemia. While many readers might have an understanding of cancer processes, cancer patients’ experiences, and traditional pathways to care and remission, others may not. If teaching this with high school students, we suggest incorporating a “Know, Want to Know, Learned” chart into your memoir unit. Invite students to complete the “Know” and “Want to Know” portions of the chart before reading. Consider using students’ charts to inform independent and/or classwide learning on cancer, particularly leukemia (and its impact on the Black community), before beginning Nehanda’s memoir. As students read, encourage them to add information to their individual or classwide “Learned” column.

#### ❖ Pre-Reading Activity: Identity, Community, and Care

Knowing and taking care of oneself and one’s community are central themes in *Bless the Blood*. Whether you read this book independently or in community, we hope that you begin your journey into *Bless the Blood* by reflecting on your own identities, community, and modes of caring for yourself and others. Before you begin reading, take some time to reflect upon, journal, sketch, or discuss your experiences and orientation to self-care and community care with others. The prompts below are offered as guidance as you embark on your own reflection and reading journey. When done reflecting and discussing, consider developing a plan for caring for yourself and your reading community while engaging with this book.







## PROMPTS AND RESOURCES FOR UNPACKING IDENTITY AND UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

### Guiding Questions

- What experiences and identities shape your experiences in the world?
- What privilege is afforded to you as you navigate society? How does that impact how you are treated by others on a day-to-day basis?
- What similarities and differences exist between you and others in your reading community or class? How might that impact how you engage in reading, reflection, and discussion?

## RESOURCES

- [The Social Identity Wheel and Workshop](#)
- [Facing History: Identity Charts](#)
- [Expressing the Individual: Identity Maps | Activity \(National Gallery of Art\)](#)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Essay from Walela Nehanda about impossible cancer patient standards](#)
- [Tools for navigating capacity](#)
- [Time and Disability resources](#)




## PROMPTS AND RESOURCES FOR ENGAGING IN SELF AND COMMUNITY CARE IN THIS MOMENT

### Guiding Questions

- What activities, people, or places bring you joy, calm, and peace in this moment?
- What barriers or obstacles might prevent you from taking care of yourself?
- How do you engage in caring for yourself on a routine basis?
- Who or what might help you stay accountable in taking care of yourself as you read?
- What does care look like in your communities?
- What barriers to wellness, resources, or care exist in your school, neighborhood, and/or community at large? What might the world look like if those barriers did not exist?
- What resources might you have at your disposal to create and maintain modes of community care?

## RESOURCES

- [“Self-Care in the Movement” \(Learning for Justice\)](#)
  - [“Self-Care: A Guide” \(Young Minds\)](#)
  - [Essay: “Managing burnout as organizers and cultivating radical community care” by Sammie Lewis \(People’s World\)](#)
  - [Resource: Community Care \(Mental Health America\)](#)
  - [Resource: BIPOC Mental Health Resources](#)
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## “DURING READING” DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / REFLECTION PROMPTS

- ❖ In the writer’s note, Nehanda repeats the line, “this here ain’t a John Green novel,” which is also the poem title. What does this mean to you as a reader? What do you expect to happen that may be unlike or contradictory to John Green’s novels? Why might the book begin with this statement?
- ❖ In “Phase 3 CML Described like a Genre of Sci-Fi for the Sake of Your Understanding” (p. 5), Nehanda uses an anonymous voice speaking to a captain as the genre of sci-fi is used for the “sake of your understanding.” Is the understanding for the reader’s comprehension in this poem, Nehanda’s, or perhaps both? How might this poem land differently if another genre were used in place of sci-fi?
- ❖ The irony in “‘Family Reunion’—The O’Jays” (p. 10) is that the O’Jays sing about “how nice, so nice” it will be to get together in their song “Family Reunion,” while all Nehanda feels is guilt and shame. Do you think people facing cancer deal with these emotions at some point in their diagnosis? How might this impact their family dynamics? How might this impact their cultural identity?
- ❖ In “The Mentor’s Silence” (p. 14), Nehanda states: “silence/is an acknowledgement of its own kind.” What does this line mean to Nehanda? How might it connect to your own idea of or connections with silence? Later, in “The Early 2000s Weren’t as Liberal as Everyone Claims” (p. 46) Nehanda writes, “My father’s eyes avoid mine. / His silence, an incantation. / His wordlessness, / a premonition of its own.” How does this description of silence from Nehanda’s father compare with the earlier silence from their mentor?
- ❖ In “My Mother Asks, ‘What Do You Want to Have Happen If You Die’ and We Sign the Advanced Directive” (p. 21), many concepts show up as voices to Nehanda, including the Past and the Present. What would happen if they also included the Future in this piece? How might the dynamic of Hope and Faith be altered?
- ❖ “The First Set of Seven Days” (p. 29) is a deeply intimate image of mother and child on a hospital bed together while Nehanda recollects childhood. Which lines stand out most to you as the reader? Why?
- ❖ In Whitney Houston’s “Greatest Love of All,” she sings: “No matter what they take from me/ They can’t take away my dignity.” How might this famous line contradict or connect with Nehanda’s voice in “The Novelty of Cancer Is Wearing Off” (p. 36)? How might it connect with cancer survivors in general?
- ❖ Faith and religion seem to be an underlying factor in Nehanda’s book as well as what their family describes as “hoodoo-voodoo nonsense” (p. 31). How does religion and/or spirituality shape Nehanda’s experiences and reflection on their cancer journey? How might your own faith and religious experiences impact your reading of their poetry?
- ❖ Nehanda’s poems often illuminate how race and disability impact how others perceive them and the care they receive. Consider their story as a window into the interconnectedness of societal injustices. What insight do poems such as “But you don’t look sick” (p. 104) and “Unsolicited Advice” (p. 150) offer about how medical apartheid affects the ways we treat each other? Are you ever upset by Walela’s anger, and how does that compare to your feelings toward the state’s treatment of Walela? If you had a friend who shared Walela’s experience, how could you use emotional literacy skills to respond in a way that pushed back against ableism?



## “DURING READING” DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / REFLECTION PROMPTS

- ❖ Nehanda writes, “Not all things that are magic announce themselves boldly. / Sometimes, it’s a Black mother and child making it to evening. / Resting” (p. 43). What does this line mean to you as a reader? How might it be relevant in the past, as Nehanda recollects their childhood, but also now to their current relationship dynamics? How does this line lend itself to describing Black motherhood in the current state of the world?
- ❖ In “A Sarcastic Blessing for the Second Man Who Complimented My Early Leukemia Symptoms, 2016” (p. 57), the poet writes: “Gosh, men can be foolish / believing they have the right to architect / anyone else around them” after being with various men who notice Walela’s symptoms before family members or friends do. What insights does this poem offer about the complexities of intimacy? How else do these two worlds of intimacy collide?
- ❖ “The Cancer Support Group” (p. 59) concludes with a line reading: “These women slowly teach me / what it means to be gently volatile.” What does gently volatile mean in this context? What does it mean to you?
- ❖ “Tracing Roots of a Family Tree” (pp. 76–77) explores the nuances of ancestry, death, and legacies of violence against Black bodies. Nehanda writes, “To my family, to look forward is to be hopeful that there is a better future, maybe not for their generation, but maybe the next one. And the next one after that.” How is this book an act of looking forward? How is Nehanda’s identity in resistance to the past? How are they a model for the future?
- ❖ Since enslavement, Black folks have been treated like bodies by the healthcare system rather than human beings. Nehanda refers to this as both medical neglect and medical apartheid (p. 269). **Research** has shown that medical training has often contributed to widely believed fallacies about Black patients’ tolerance of pain. Falsehoods like these can have grave effects on care received and feelings of inclusion and safety in medical settings. How does the racist history of the healthcare field expose itself throughout Nehanda’s book? What signs and examples of medical apartheid do you see in how Nehanda is treated throughout their cancer journey?
- ❖ The title poem, “Bless the Blood” (p. 158), represents quite a shift in Nehanda’s memoir. What do you notice most in this poem? Why might it also serve as the title of the book? Is there a shift in tone or messaging with the poems previous to this one and those that follow?
- ❖ In “Mass Death & Productivity” (p. 321), Nehanda asks, “What does it mean to be living?” What does it mean to be living to you? To be alive during this moment in these tumultuous times takes care and courage. How are you living?
- ❖ Throughout this memoir, Walela Nehanda uses their experiences (and those of others) to critique the American medical industry. How does their experience with accessing care, navigating doctors and hospitals, and balancing sickness in this country compare and/or contrast to your own experiences? What about Nehanda’s experiences surprised you? What curiosities or critiques do you have as you read?
- ❖ In any poetry collection, some poems will resonate more than others. Which poems in *Bless the Blood* most resonate with you? Consider your identities, experiences, and interests. Why might these poems resonate more than others? Are there specific lines or images that you are still thinking about?
- ❖ Throughout their memoir, Nehanda uses structure to illuminate their poems’ rich themes and reflections. Consider the structure in the following poems (or others). What does Nehanda’s use of structure offer to the poem’s meaning?
  - “The Mentor’s Silence” (p. 14)
  - “The Family Home Rules Described to Me, at 23 Years Old, before Discharge” (p. 31)
  - “But You Don’t Look Sick” (p. 104)
  - “iMessage Cranks My Eating Disorder to 1000” (p. 139)
  - “‘Grandma’s Hands’ — Bill Withers” (p. 161)
  - “The Heart Interrogates Me and My Trauma” (p. 226)
  - “Messages in a Bottle Lost on an Island Shore Somewhere” (p. 228)
  - “Life Decisions Made in the Bathroom of Bossa Nova Brazilian Cuisine” (p. 306)



## “DURING READING” DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / REFLECTION PROMPTS

- ❖ Throughout the memoir, Nehanda fuses the brutal realities of navigating the medical system as a Black cancer patient with discussions of life as a twentysomething-year-old poet—chemotherapy effects and denials of care are paired alongside pop song lyrics, TV show reruns, relationship woes, money troubles, and even a new puppy. What does this fusion of devastating diagnosis and relatable everyday life offer to readers trying to understand Nehanda’s self-development and healing process?
- ❖ In “Running on E” (p. 212), Nehanda lists a myriad of things on which they run. These include but are not limited to: empty, hope, denial, self-sacrifice, back-to-back phone calls, lonely, ache, and blame. Reflect on your day-to-day living in this moment. What feelings, concepts, or ideas are you running on? How does that impact how you show up in school, work, and/or community?
- ❖ South Central and Mid-City Los Angeles. Greece. Jasper, Texas. New York City. Germany. Throughout the memoir, Nehanda maps their journey through important places that impact how they see themselves and the world. How do place and space function as vehicles for illuminating Nehanda’s understanding of themselves and others?
- ❖ Navigating familial bonds—biological and chosen—is a recurring theme in *Bless the Blood*. While reading, consider how Nehanda uses form, language, and perspective to complicate what it means to love and be loved in a familial context.
- ❖ Consider Nehanda’s struggles with obtaining care and resources through Medi-Cal and dependence on internet strangers for funds. What insight do Nehanda’s poems, such as “Authorizations on Medi-Cal Be Like” (p. 144), “Social Media Is a Bitter Wasteland” (p. 181), “We Can’t Buy a Cure, but We Can Sure Try” (p. 98), and “‘Bills, Bills, Bills’—Destiny’s Child” (p. 186) offer about the process of accessing care and sustaining oneself while living with and fighting cancer?
- ❖ In “Crip vs. *Crip*” (p. 175), Nehanda explores the complexities of language and definitions related to one word both used for disability and gang affiliation in their community. What nuances does their poem reveal about what it means to claim an identity and/or belong to a community?
- ❖ Throughout their memoir, Nehanda grapples with feelings of hopelessness, guilt, and despair. In “Cancer and the Illusion of Choice,” they wonder, “How do I find happiness in the midst of all this?” (p. 189). How are you finding happiness in this moment? What activities, people, and places provide respite from the heaviness of this world?
- ❖ In “Change = Grief + Acceptance” (p. 291), Nehanda’s therapist offers them this concept of approaching growth and healing in their journey. What might it mean to grieve and mourn the person we could’ve been? How does Nehanda reckon with the impact of societal barriers, sickness, intergenerational trauma, and interpersonal complexities on their personal identity and aspirations?
- ❖ Nehanda juxtaposes deep and rich personal reflections with an intentional use of medical drug names and detailed descriptions of the physical impact of chemotherapy, cancer, and stem cell transplant. How does this juxtaposition impact your understanding of their experiences and perspective throughout their journey?
- ❖ Memory, remembrance, and legacy are core themes in *Bless the Blood*. How does memory and remembrance shape Nehanda’s identity as they navigate their journey with leukemia?
- ❖ In “For Whitney Houston” (p. 183), Nehanda proclaims, “I want to receive flowers while living. I want to give flowers while I am still able. I won’t want to rely on being good enough by someone else’s impossible standard.” Reflect on this sentiment and shower yourself and others with flowers. Consider writing notes of gratitude and adoration for those you admire and love.



# "AFTER READING" PROMPTS AND EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

## Creative Reflection

Nehanda's book reads like a love letter to one's self and one's lineage. When done reading, spend time writing your love letter to yourself and your lineage. Consider the following prompts when writing:

- What obstacles or barriers have you overcome to exist in this moment?
- What people, places, and things contributed to your existence and survival?
- To whom or what do you owe your tenacity and resilience?
- What lessons inform your love for yourself and others?
- What do you still want to accomplish in this world?
- What do you want your legacy to be in this world? How will you make it so?

## Extension Activity: Exploring More Books in Verse

After reading this book in the classroom, consider inviting students to further explore the verse book form. For consideration: *What does the form offer writers in their storytelling? How does reading verse stories compare or contrast to reading other meaningful texts?*

### Additional great books for exploration:

- *The Black Flamingo* by Dean Atta
- *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo
- *Every Body Looking* by Candice Iloh
- *Forever Is Now* by Mariama Lockington
- *Home Is Not a Country* by Safia Elhillo
- *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson
- *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam
- *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai

## Extension Activity: Digging in the Crates: Unpacking the *Bless the Blood* Mixtape

Music—songs, lyrics, and artists—play a critical role in Walela Nehanda's storytelling in *Bless the Blood*. Explore the [author-created playlist of artists and songs](#) mentioned in the book. When listening, consider, reflect, and discuss the following prompts:

- How does listening impact how you understand Nehanda's narrative?
- In what ways does sound/music impact Nehanda's (often lonely) journey?
- What songs/artists resonate most/least with you as a reader/listener?
- After reading, what songs/artists might you add to this mixtape?

## Extension Activity: Create-Your-Own Research Project

Throughout *Bless the Blood*, Walela Nehanda mentions several people and community initiatives worthy of further explanation. Consider completing independent or community-action research projects in which you learn more about one of the following people and initiatives below.

- Dr. Mutulu Shakur
- Claire Wineland
- Black Disability Collective
- Audre Lorde
- Medical apartheid
- Kathryn Poe
- Robin Roberts



## “AFTER READING” PROMPTS AND EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### Extension with *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot

Similar to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Henrietta Lacks’s story of racism and racial injustice in medicine, *Bless the Blood* carries themes of family challenges and acceptance, consent and bioethics, exploitation and inequalities, and the intersection of humanity and science. For those unfamiliar with Lacks’s tragic story, her cells were stolen from her by Johns Hopkins University in 1951. Before this travesty, there were no medical consent forms. Without her and her family’s knowledge or consent, Johns Hopkins researchers and doctors took her cells, which were cancerous and “immortal” under the microscope and in petri dishes, named them HeLa cells, sold them to various hospitals, researchers, and academics, and continued to multiply the cells for breakthroughs in polio vaccines, cancer treatments, and various other medical research. Her story exemplifies the challenges Black patients like Nehanda and other BIPOC patients still face in hospitals.

- **Reflect and Discuss:** Using Lacks’s story as a companion to *Bless the Blood*, consider the similar themes between both stories. How might *Bless the Blood* be a modern retelling of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*? Focusing on the title, how might “immortal” compare to the idea of “blessings”?
- **Creative expression:** Craft a two-voiced poem between Lacks and Nehanda. Craft a two-voiced poem between Lacks’s immortal cells and Nehanda’s cancerous cells.
- **Artistic representation:** Curate a zine to spread awareness about racial injustices and consent within the medical community using the lineage from 1951 to now. What travesties are necessary to include that share experiences similar to those of Lacks and Nehanda? What audience might be the focus of this zine? How does historical malpractice compare to the experiences Black patients (and the larger BIPOC community) face now?

## Additional Companion Readers for *Bless the Blood: A Cancer Memoir*

- *All About Love* by bell hooks
- *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon
- *The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde
- *The Collected Schizophrenias* by Esmé Weijun Wang
- *I Am Not Your Negro* by James Baldwin
- *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* by Harriet A. Washington
- “this here aint a allen ginsberg poem!” by Cynthia Parker-Ohene
- *Thick: And Other Essays* by Tressie McMillan Cottom
- *How We Fight for Our Lives* by Saeed Jones
- *Notes From a Young Black Chef* by Kwame Onwuachi
- *Five Feet Apart* by Rachael Lippincott
- *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler
- “10 Principles of Disability Justice” by Sins Invalid
- *Anarcha Speaks: A History in Poems* by Dominique Christina
- *Capitalism and Disability: Selected Writings* by Marta Russell
- *Illness as Metaphor* by Susan Sontag
- *Between Two Kingdoms: A Memoir of Life Interrupted* by Suleika Jaouad
- *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot
- *Disability and Visibility: First Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alice Wong
- *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha
- *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* by Angela Chen
- *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture* by Sherronda J. Brown
- *Another Black Girl Miracle* by Tonya Ingram
- *Innocence & Corruption* by Aiyana Goodfellow

### About the Writers of This Guide

**shea wesley martin** is an award-winning scholar-teacher with over a decade of experience in classrooms and community spaces. Their scholarship and pedagogy explore the possibilities and nuances within Blackness, queerness, transness, and reimagining literacy.

**Carrie Mattern** is a mother, educator, writer, and organizer. Currently, she teaches English to middle school students while offering them the idea of discovering their identities using literacy as a foundation. She focuses on inclusivity and equity, reimagining educational engagement, scholarship, and future pathways to success for the modern student.