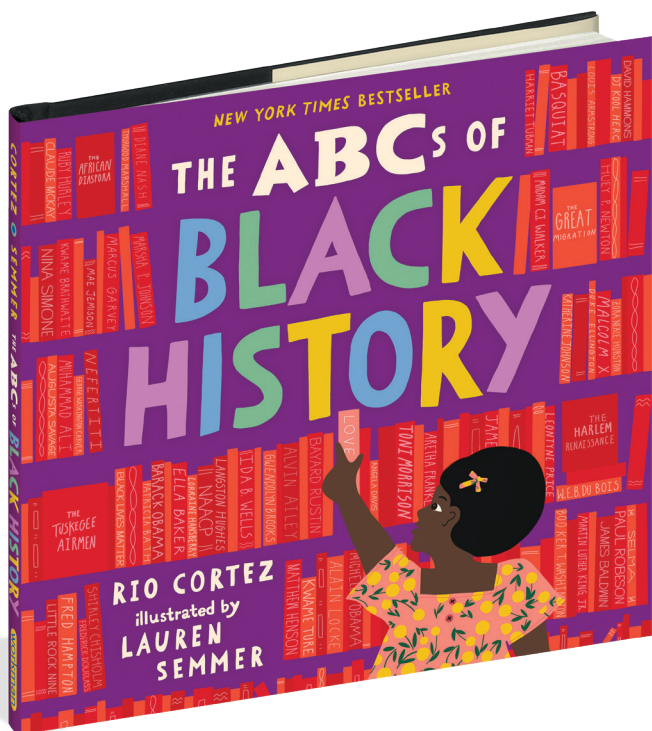


# THE ABCS OF BLACK HISTORY

## EDUCATOR GUIDE

Created by Amy Jurskis



**RIO CORTEZ** is a writer and Pushcart Prize–nominated poet who has received fellowships from Poets House, Cave Canem, and CantoMundo foundations. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Miami Rail*, and *Mother* magazine, among others. Born and raised in Salt Lake City, Rio writes and lives in Harlem, New York.



**LAUREN SEMMER** is an artist, children’s book illustrator, and designer. She studied drawing at St. Paul College of Visual Arts and art history at New York University. Lauren’s bright and charming work is featured on everything from kids’ wall art to children’s apparel. She lives in Manhattan, New York with her family.

“In rhyming couplets, [Cortez] leads readers on a journey through Black life that acknowledges pain and struggle while building confidence with examples of triumph. It’s a tricky maneuver when writing for children, but Cortez pulls it off.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“...The layers of history are plentiful and complex. . . . A useful mentor text for writing projects, a springboard for research, and an essential addition to classroom libraries.”

—*Booklist Book Review*

“An impressive array of names, events, and concepts from Black history are introduced in this alphabet book for early-elementary readers . . . The rhyming verses are light on the tongue, making the reading smooth and soothing. The brightly colored, folk art–style illustrations offer vibrant scenes of historical and contemporary Black life . . .”

—*Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review*

“Poet Cortez pens an informative ode to Black history in her children’s book debut . . . A particularly resonant spread shows a crowd holding signs that reflect both historical and current events, including ‘We March with Selma’ and ‘We Can’t Breathe,’ demonstrating to young readers how past occurrences affect the present. A richly accessible resource for anyone seeking to celebrate Black visionaries.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

## ABOUT THIS BOOK:

*The ABCs of Black History* is a book that you can read over and over again, seeing something new in the detailed illustrations and allusive and alliterative text. As a result, it works as both a read-aloud text for a traditional picture book audience and as a text for older students. The book opens with a “More to Explore” section with resources for further reading and features a detailed glossary of terms and figures in the back.

The questions and activities in this guide are designed for grades 3–8. The CCSS are from the Anchor Standards for English Language Arts.

## BEFORE YOU READ:

Ask students to brainstorm and generate a list of everything they know about Black history, including important people and events.

## GUIDED READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

1. What was the most surprising thing you learned about Black history? What was the most inspiring thing you learned?
2. Why is it important to know your own history? Why is it important to learn about the history of others?
3. The book begins with an epigraph by James Baldwin: “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.” What do you think Baldwin means when he says history is the present, not the past? What might be difficult about carrying an awareness of your history? How could “carrying your history” and the history of your ancestors be helpful? After reading this book, why do you think Rio Cortez chose James Baldwin’s quote to introduce *The ABCs of Black History*?



4. The twelfth letter of the alphabet is *L*. The pages the author and illustrator dedicated to this letter are different from the rest of the book, with a short verse:

**L is for love. L is for love.**

**L is always for love.**

The pictures in the illustration represent different love stories and types of love. Just as these pages are at the center of the book, how is love at the center of Black history?

5. This book begins and ends with allusions to the poem and song “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” Look up the full text of this anthem and explain how verses in the poem relate to specific moments in *The ABCs of Black History*.
6. The illustrations for the letters *M* and *V* include visual timelines that stretch from the past to the present. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once said: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Explain how these pages reflect King’s words. What do they suggest about our role in the present? What do they suggest about the future?
7. The author of this book, Rio Cortez, is a poet. Examine this book’s text as one long poem or as a series of poems (one for each letter of the alphabet). Try reading the text aloud. What do you notice about the poem’s rhythm? How does it make you feel when you speak it out loud? During the Harlem Renaissance (see the letter *H*), poets like Langston Hughes began experimenting with incorporating musical elements from jazz into their poetry. What musical elements can you see (and hear) in Cortez’s poetry?
8. Examine the section about the letter *K*. What is significant about the themes of the seven days of Kwanzaa? How do these themes connect to other moments in Black history?
9. Rio Cortez is careful to include painful events, as well as triumphs and celebrations, in *The ABCs of Black History*. Why is it important to remember and honor both aspects of history? What would happen if we only focused on the bad things that have happened? What would happen if we only talked about the triumphant moments? What can we learn from each type of experience?
10. When schools teach about important historical figures, we often ignore the contributions of women and people of color. Why is it important to learn about scientists, leaders, inventors, innovators, entrepreneurs, artists, writers, explorers, athletes, and mathematicians from diverse backgrounds?



## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.



### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

1. According to Merriam-Webster, an allusion is an implied or indirect reference. Both the text and the illustrations in this book are rich with allusions. Most of these are identified and explained in the text's glossary. Others, like the significance of the raised fists in the illustration for the letter *B*, are left for the reader to discover on their own. Choose one (or more) of the people or events that are alluded to in this book and conduct research to learn more about them. Why do you think Rio Cortez and Lauren Semmer chose to include this person or event in *The ABCs of Black History*?

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

2. The illustration for the letter *G* (the Great Migration) pays tribute to African American artist Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series*, a 60-panel series that tells the story of the Great Migration. Examine the story told through these pictures and their text. What common themes do you see in the story of the Great Migration and the story of Black history in *The ABCs of Black History*?

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.3

Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

3. Analyze this book as a work of poetry, looking for examples of alliteration, assonance, end rhyme, slant rhyme, imagery, and any other poetic devices you can find in the text. Using Cortez's book as an example, write a poem about your own family's history that features a line or stanza for each letter of the alphabet.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

4. One recurring theme in this book is the importance of education and the impact that education can have on society (see letters *E*, *N*, *S*, *T*, and *W*). Why is it important to ensure that everyone has access to education? Why are people willing to fight for equal access to education? Examine the letter *T* and the information about W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington in the glossary. Write a persuasive essay or speech about whether you think it's more important for schools to teach students job skills or to build a foundation of knowledge in academic disciplines like English, history, math, and science.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.8

Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

5. What career would you like to pursue? Research a figure from Black history (feel free to select a contemporary figure who is making history or a figure from the past). You might choose someone mentioned in Rio Cortez's book, but you are also welcome to research independently to find someone. Write a five-paragraph biography about the person you select and their contributions to their field. Be sure to cite the sources you use.

