

Where We Come Together: A *United We Stand* Theme

Even in the midst of divisions within our culture, we often come together with others unlike ourselves. In the workplace. The classroom. The neighborhood. The grocery store. The polling site or the courtroom. In moments of celebration or crisis. In times of needing assistance or in attitudes of political resistance. Even within the abstract places that are history or the media landscape, we inhabit a common space. Often the circumstances bringing us together are random, but the choices we make while together are *ours*, and they matter very much. In shared spaces we have interactions—some tense, some pleasant, some neutral—that help us learn more about one another. We may come away with new insight about another’s perspective for the first time or a new sense of our shared goals and values as residents of these very diverse, but united, states.

This series explores some of the American spaces where we come together, assessing through history, imaginative writing, and images how our interactions inform our sense of who we are, individually and collectively. Each of the texts in this theme explores how interactions among people from different walks of life cause us to reassess our values and ideals within our private spaces, affecting our choices about who we are, where we want to live, and how we might adjust our future interactions.

One of the most important ways we broaden our sense of the shared space of this continent is through a deeper study of its history. When we don’t know *what we don’t know* about our own shared, everyday histories—beyond the biographies of presidents and the familiar stories of major wars, technological advances, and movements—how can we make space for one another as belonging equally in this nation? Providing the launchpad for this series is the 30th anniversary re-release of the groundbreaking book *A Different Mirror*, by historian Ronald Takaki. At the height of Takaki’s publishing career in the early 1990s, one reviewer wrote, “What is needed now is an entirely different way of studying and teaching American history—one in which ‘different shores’ are seen as equal points of departure in a story of multidimensional ethnic interaction.” This may be truer today even more so than when the book was first released. Setting aside the traditional hierarchies of who arrived where and when, who took leadership positions, and whose agenda won, this theme begins with familiar histories newly woven together. The very foundation of where we come together lies in the stories of the lesser-known people—of various Indigenous, enslaved-then-freed, and migrant groups—acting out histories in shared landscapes across the continent.

In addition to deepening our historical knowledge, we can expand our sense of collective belonging through reading imaginative literature. Novelist Jane Smiley argues that the novel is the most democratic form of literature because it immerses us for so long in someone else's experience of the world. One could argue that this is also true of nonfiction, of course. Whether or not we're aware of it in the moment, the very act of reading a book-length story merges our psyche with another's and helps us see life through their eyes. Often stories stick with us for life, maybe even slightly-but-permanently influencing the way we think about a topic or interact with a certain type of person. Indeed, several cognitive studies in recent years have successfully documented the very real ways in which reading imaginative writing not only benefits our intellects but also boosts empathy, cultural capacities, and interpersonal communication skills. Simply put (in the powerful words of a former gang member, no less): "It's hard to hate somebody if you know their story."

The imaginative works in this series were chosen with these assumptions in mind, that reading is an immersive, compassion-building exercise. With stories from various historical periods and ranging across settings from New England to the deep South, to California's multiethnic communities, these books explore American stories of people coming together in unexpected and life-changing ways. Lila Quintero Weaver's memoir *Darkroom* draws us into brand new perspectives of the familiar civil rights period in America's deep south. Told in drawings and from the perspective of an immigrant from South America, she shifts the lens and helps us see that period in new ways. Likewise, Louisa May Alcott's *Work* shifts our understanding of the lives of women and larger social dynamics in the 19th century; Laila Lalami's novel *The Other Americans* sheds new light on how multiple identity groups negotiate their versions of the American Dream; and Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* playfully flips the script, making us laugh while also helping us to see the very real ways in which mass media informs the way we see ourselves and move through the world.

While very different in approach, tone, and genre, the books in this series are intended to be simultaneously entertaining and thought-provoking. They represent a sampling of everyday American lives in moments of unusual interactions so that we may all contemplate our own in the spaces where we come together.

Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A Multicultural History of America* (1993), with a new Foreword by Clint Smith (2023)

Takaki was a social historian cut from the same cloth as Howard Zinn, whose *A People's History of the United States* (1980) challenged the way we think about history. While some have attacked this approach as "revisionist," what it revises is simply the way we

read and understand history, offering a “bottom-up” view of history *in addition to* a “top-down” one. Takaki’s work acknowledges the root of “story” in history and proposes that the narratives guiding our sense of shared origins and progress need to be more inclusive, that there are important perspectives beyond the vantage-point of these Anglo-Americans who held leadership positions for much of our history. The less powerful people who engaged in the work of building the nation also created narratives, but those narratives were unofficial because those who created them didn’t always have access to the languages, literacies, and media afforded to those in more powerful positions.

The re-publication of Takaki’s book is infused with new relevance by a foreword from Clint Smith, whose recent bestseller *How the Word is Passed* (2021) engaged in a similar sweeping and inclusive reassessment of the continent’s history and the echoes of the past in our contemporary, personal lives. Written in a highly readable—and at times personal—style, *A Different Mirror* creatively plants thematic signposts into his chronological study of America from the period before settlement through the 20th century. He weaves throughout the book the intersecting or dovetailing stories of Native Americans, African Americans, Chicanos, and Irish, Asian, and Jewish immigrants, using a variety of sources like songs, oral stories, letters, slang, and personal accounts to document the complex history of the continent. As a *New York Times* book review described it, “Takaki’s book is nothing less than an attempt to view all of American history from a multicultural perspective. It is a laudable effort—humane, well-informed, accessible, and often inclusive. It is clearly not intended to divide Americans but rather to teach them to value the nation’s inescapable diversity.” This book does as its title promises, holding up a “different mirror” for us to see ourselves, and to see what Henry Louis Gates calls its “truly humane sense of American possibility.”

Louisa May Alcott, *Work, A Story of Experience* (1873)

The first imaginative work comes from the 19th century, to see how American writers of the past used the popular novel to examine the world around them. Though best known for her coming-of-age classic *Little Women* (1868), Alcott’s writings ranged well beyond the lives of children. Educated in a self-designed and progressive curriculum by her father, the thoroughly unconventional Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott was committed to exploring important social issues through accessible popular fiction styles. Stylistically, her novel *Work* falls somewhere between the “social problem” novels of Charles Dickens (*Hard Times*, *Oliver Twist*) and Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Her semi-autobiographical character Christie defies the expectations of Victorian women’s novels by proclaiming in the first line a “new Declaration of Independence,” and she sets out into the world to find her way, without love and marriage as her primary goal. One of the first people she meets after

leaving her sheltered upbringing is a formerly enslaved woman experiencing injustice. From there, Christie's journey takes her into a variety of work situations, communities, and encounters with new people—from poor outcasts to wealthy wolves in disguise—that gradually challenge her to identify her goals and engage in a meaningful life. In the end, she works to embody the concept of self-reliance to set an independent moral compass and create the kind of community she wants to see in the world.

Lila Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* (2012)

In *Darkroom*, beautifully rich monochromatic drawings comprise the true story of one family's experience of the civil rights movement. Like Takaki's book, Quintero Weaver's sophisticated and multi-layered approach to storytelling provides us a different mirror on this familiar period in 20th-century American history. She evokes the multi-faceted concept of "black and white" from the beginning and, alongside the familiar black/white racial divide in the South, plays with the symbolism of black and white in the film-development darkroom, where impressions of what is developing in a dark space are only partially clear. Told from the point-of-view of the artist as a child, the story follows her family's migration from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to Marion, Alabama, in the 1960s, as they follow an opportunity for her father to teach Spanish in American colleges. Arriving in a small town "crackling" with racial tensions, the author immerses us in her view on the ground as a child trying to decode the ambiguous delineations of racial categories and the unwritten codes of conduct. As her family adds a "sliver of gray into the demographic pie" of the town that had previously been "neatly divided between black and white," she and her siblings have to figure out exactly where they fit in, how their own cultural understandings of race and ancestry figure into their identities, and how they might bridge the racial divides in their own desires to contribute to the movement for equality.

Laila Lalami, *The Other Americans* (2019)

Born in Morocco's capitol and educated in Morocco, Britain, and the U.S., Lalami brings the migrant's experience of many cultures into her creation of a diverse group of characters rendered with complexity and psychological nuance. These characters come together around a crisis—some voluntarily, but most involuntarily. The setting is a small desert town on the edge of Joshua Tree National Park in California, where Moroccan immigrant and diner owner Driss Guerraoui has been killed in a hit-and-run accident. Was it an accident? A hate crime? The story is simultaneously a family drama and a "whodunnit," told in alternating chapters from the viewpoints of the victim's family members, the undocumented migrant who may have witnessed something important, the diverse members of the local sheriff's department, and the Anglo-American proprietors of the neighboring business. As the people involved move through a variety of interactions to answer the central questions about Mr. Guerraoui's death, moments

of interpersonal tensions and tenderness unfold. Characters are left asking themselves additional, unexpected questions about whose secrets to keep, how to love and love well, what success means, when and how to do the right thing, and which of the many Americans in this community are the “other” Americans.

Charles Yu, *Interior Chinatown* (2020)

The series ends with a book that is a bit more light-hearted in tone, allowing us to laugh at ourselves even as we consider the serious issues at the heart of our collective American story. An experienced and award-winning television writer, Yu experiments with our expectations of a novel by using the format of a television script to tell the story. He comedically interrogates how different groups are portrayed in the media and, in turn, how those media representations influence our sense of identity. Yu creates an alter-ego in his protagonist Willis Wu, who has been stuck in the undesirable roles of “generic Asian man” and “striving immigrant” for too long; he longs to break out and be cast as the heroic “Kung Fu Guy.” When a murder takes place in Chinatown, Wu wonders if this might be his chance. He then encounters the detectives—an attractive young white woman and a muscular Black man straight out of Central Casting—who have come to solve the mystery, and together these three humorously peel back the stereotypes for each of their groups. As the real lives and struggles behind the mass media version of Chinatown are gradually exposed, we are left wondering whether what we are seeing is a television show, a metaphor, or both. A challenging but *fun* reading experience, readers will understand how this author’s innovations in genre earned him a National Book Award. Yu’s approach to the “whodunnit” genre is definitely more satirical than the sincere *The Other Americans*, and the two books together serve as a study in contrasting ways to provoke thought about the role crisis plays in our identities.

Credits

This theme is part of the National Endowment for the Humanities’ *United We Stand: Connecting Through Culture* initiative. This initiative aims to combat hate-based violence through community engagement by fostering cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and community resilience.



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“Where We Come Together” was developed by Tracy Floreani. She is Professor of English at Oklahoma City University and serves as Director of the Jeanne Hoffman Smith Center for Film & Literature. She holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Kansas and is a specialist in multiethnic American literature. Her first book *Fifties Ethnicities: The Ethnic Novel and Mass Culture at Midcentury* was published in 2013, and she is completing two new books: an edited collection on teaching the works of Ralph Ellison and a biography of Fanny McConnell Ellison.

