



## Theme Essay

*Raphael Njoku, 2021*

Modern America emerged in a multiracial incubator. In this social milieu in which Whites, Blacks, Native Americans, Latinos, and Asians contributed to the American Dream, the term *race* has emerged as a marker of power, identity, inclusion/exclusion, and access to opportunities (or lack of) in a world of difference. From the trails of colonial conquest and plantation slavery, through the pains of civil war, emancipation, and the Civil Rights Movement, people of all backgrounds have told their stories and shared their experiences on the question of race. These stories will remain important for the present generation and those to come. Therefore, it is critical to engage in open discussions to help make sense of what race is all about, its nuanced manifestations, and impact on modern life.

The books in this theme provide insights into personal encounters with incidents of racism that differ across individuals, genders, and groups. Through these stories, we can see that racial conflicts sometimes hide other social problems – including ignorance, economic competition, mental health, and criminal actions—that may not be directly connected to race and skin color.

The “Starting the Conversation: Race and Racism” theme is planned as a series of discussions to be approached as a whole. Each book and book discussion focuses on stories created on the author’s lived experience with racism in time and space. Readers are strongly advised to pay attention to the storyteller’s identity, historical context, purpose, and audience. Some of the books were prepared for a general audience. Others targeted specific individuals or groups. Some dealt with a moment; others were designed to endure as long as Americans care about a more inclusive community. Altogether, the novels touch on how literature and literary narrative play a role in conversations about race/racism in ways different from reading non-fiction or academic texts. As Chinua Achebe reminds us in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), “stories save our progeny from blundering like the blind into the spikes of the cactus fence.” The story is our escort; it owns us and directs us.

In Idaho, the propensity to racial divisions is a growing social concern as the population of African American, Native American, Latin American, and Asian American minorities is becoming more visible. As readers consider the broader message on race and racism implied in these



books, they should highlight awareness and reflections on how Idahoans have conceived notions of race, community belonging, and inclusiveness in a world of increasing diversity and antagonism. For a nation founded on the principles of liberty, justice, and equality, transcending the barriers of skin color, facial characteristics, and hair texture holds the key to social justice, human rights protections, and equal opportunities for all.

In perspective, some actions and practices that may pass as acceptable for some groups may come out as offensive and harmful to others. This discussion series welcomes open conversation on these social issues to improve interracial relations, tolerance, community unity, and appreciation of diversity as vital to socioeconomic development and political harmony.

