

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GREAT STORIES CLUB SERIES

MARIA SACHIKO CECIRE, Assistant Professor of Literature, Bard College

### TEXTS

*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Dreaming in Indian: Contemporary Native American Voices*, edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale

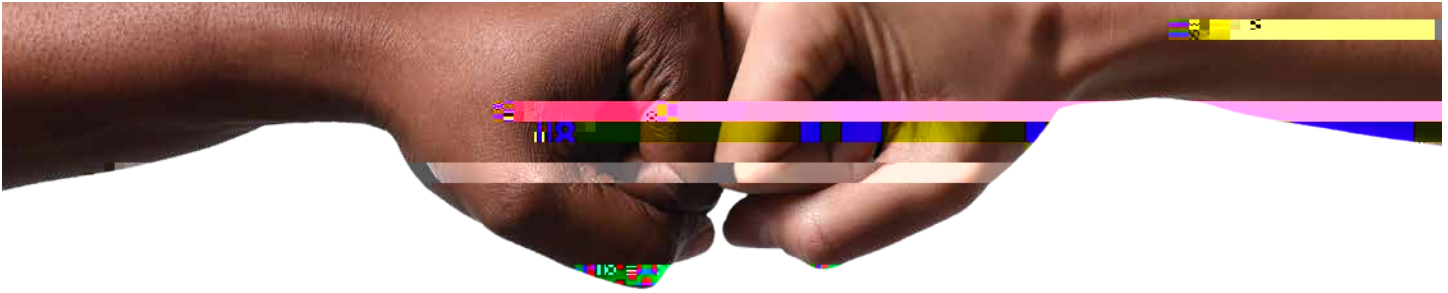
*Mother of the Sea* by Zetta Elliott

*The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano* by Sonia Manzano

*Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* by Luis J. Rodriguez

*The Shadow Hero* by Gene Luen Yang, illustrated by Sonny Liew

“**T**he past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.” Barack Obama used these words in 2008 to argue that we can only truly understand—and begin to overcome—the bitterness of modern race relations through a brave and accurate accounting of history. Obama’s line borrows from one that appears in a book by Southern author William Faulkner. In other words, he turned to literature as a source of wisdom about the difficult subject



among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Even if we leave aside the fact that this statement applied only to white men (most women in early America lacked property rights and could not vote), the Declaration’s claim of universal fairness and freedom ignores that the new country it sought to found was carved out of land forcibly taken from Indigenous residents, whose populations European settlers had devastated through disease and genocidal violence. In addition, many of the founding fathers who wrote the Declaration of Independence were slave owners, and the American economy would be built on the stolen labor of African-descended peoples under the Atlantic and domestic slave trade.

What historian William H. Chafe calls “the original sin of America’s history”—the racism that runs alongside and undermines the country’s high ideals—continues to be a troubling feature of our national makeup. “Seeing the truth of American history,” he argues, “from beginning to end, represents the only chance for America to become the kind of nation it claims to be.”<sup>1</sup> Although we are a proud nation of immigrants, one wave of migrants after another has faced racist and/or culturally driven discrimination upon their arrival. The first immigration law ever passed by Congress was aimed against a single ethnic group: the Page Act of 1875 barred Chinese women from entering the country, and it was shortly followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which banned all Chinese laborers. Even full citizens have not been safe from government-supported racism; during the Second World War, over 110,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry were forcibly relocated to camps, even though most of them were U.S. citizens. In these and other ways, many racial and ethnic groups have struggled against dehumanizing stereotypes, discriminatory policies, and intolerant attitudes as they attempted to make the United States their home.

Even as the U.S. has passed laws to reverse some of its racial injustices, others continue to thrive, often grounded in attitudes and policies that have been passed down over generations. Basic humanities questions lie at the heart of these conflicts: What does it mean to treat one another as

---

1. William H. Chafe, “History Matters,” *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 50:1 (2018), 9-26.

---

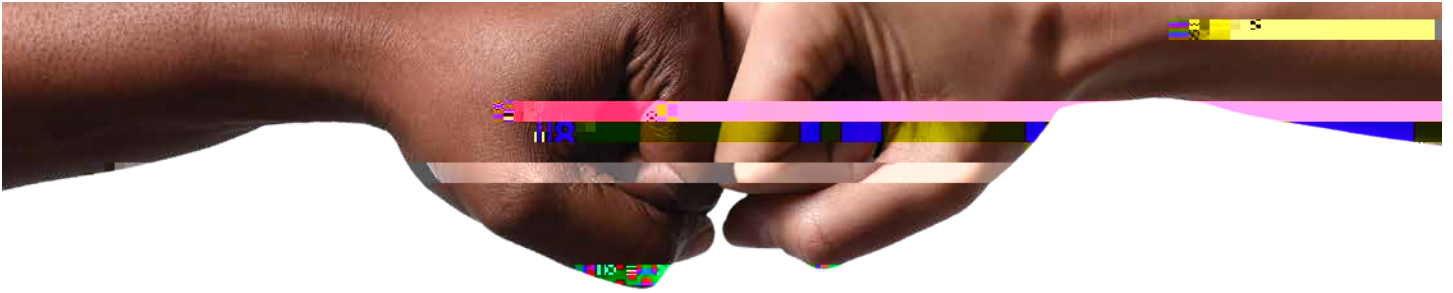
## **INTRODUCTION :: DEEPER THAN OUR SKINS**

Written by Maria Sachoiko Cecire, Assistant Professor of Literature, Bard College

---

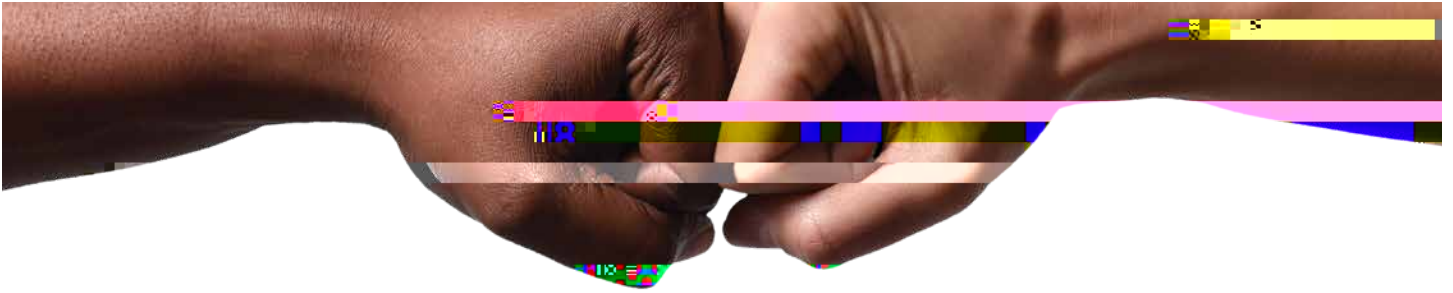
## **INTRODUCTION :: DEEPER THAN OUR SKINS**

Written by Maria Sachoiko Cecire, Assistant Professor of Literature, Bard College



How do we all continue to (re)live the past in the present? What elements of this should be celebrated, and which still require transformation if we are to develop a more just society?

BOOK 3:



### BOOK 5: *A a R : La V a L a: Ga Da L.A.*

In this memoir, Luis J. Rodriguez spins a rich web of stories about life as he encountered it as a Mexican-American child, gang member, student, friend, lover, activist, addict, and father in the Los Angeles area in the 1960s and '70s. Through his nonstop recounting of remarkable experiences, Rodriguez (“Chin”) addresses the systems of poverty, violence, and oppression that characterized his life. By juxtaposing tales of humor, cruelty, intellectual searching, and tenderness, this book especially calls attention to the complexity and humanity of people that mainstream culture often dismiss as “bad.” Why might someone pigeonholed like this continue to act in ways that reinforce other people’s stereotypes about them? How do racial and ethnic identity, as well as linguistic differences and geographic isolation, shape the creation of such stereotypes? What makes them last even as circumstances and cultures change over time?

### BOOK 6: *T S a H*

This graphic novel tells the story of how Hank, the teenage son of Chinese immigrants, tries to become a superhero in the 1940s—a time when comic book heroes were wildly popular among young people, but Asian-Americans were largely seen as dangerous outsiders by mainstream white culture. In the process, *The Shadow Hero* creates an Asian-American origin story for the Green Turtle, a World War II-era superhero created by Chinese-American comic book writer Chu Hing but whose face and ethnic identity are never revealed. This book raises questions about the limits of patriotism and empathy in the face of racial discrimination, and encourages conversations around the gaps and stereotypes in America’s history of racial representation from pop culture to politics.