

Reimagining American Democracy: Learning from the Life of Wyatt Tee Walker

LDST 390

Fall 2021

Fridays, 9-11:40 am, Boatwright Library Room 226

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Background and Rationale for the Course

American Democracy in 2021 stands at a crossroads. We must decide whether we will embrace becoming what we never have been, a genuinely inclusive multiracial democracy, or whether we will allow white supremacy to persist for yet another generation. The stakes are heightened because it has become clear that formal democracy and white supremacy can no longer co-exist: as we move inexorably to becoming a majority non-White nation, there will be efforts to restrict both democratic powers (what government can do) and democratic rights (who is able to vote and influence government).

Our specific circumstances are new, but the underlying conflict is not. For our entire history, democracy has been circumscribed and restricted by the realities of racial oppression. Yet previous generations of leaders struggled within difficult contexts to fight for progress, for racial justice, and to redeem the promise of American democracy. The most effective leaders did not do so naively: they utilized moral arguments and sought to argue for the democratic principles, but they were also realists who knew that “power concedes nothing without a demand.”

One such leader was Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, who struggled persistently on behalf of racial and social justice for over sixty years—here in Virginia, in New York, in Africa, in the Middle East. Walker gives us a potent example of what it means to “reimagine” democracy: to envision a different future, *and* to envision strategies and actions to realize that vision. Walker’s concern was not small improvement, but dismantling systems of formal racism and building new systems of racial inclusivity involving new social and economic rights. He stated clearly and persistently, long before it was popular, the view that American capitalism had exploited and deprived Black Americans and that nothing short of reparations and the reconstruction of a new political-economic system could possibly achieve either liberation or justice. And yet while Walker’s vision was large, it was not a vision for a library shelf or an academic journal; it was a vision he worked to realize, in the world, drawing on the institutional base of the Black Church but also engaging political structures and political actors, from grassroots leaders to governors. Walker was concerned with both *vision* and *power*, and with developing not only skillful opposition or resistance to power, but skillful acquisition and use of it.

We thus in this course want to engage Walker’s rich vision and work on its own terms, giving full consideration to the institutional and historical context in which it arose. But we also want to continually return to the question of what this means for us, and to the project of re-imagining American Democracy today and for the foreseeable future. This is a creative project to which all

of us—faculty, students, classroom visitors, others we engage with over the course of the semester—can contribute. We thus wish for this class to be a creative collaboration as we all learn together from Wyatt Tee Walker and his colleagues, and from each other.

Course Overview

This course examines the linkages between leadership, power, and struggles for social and racial justice as exemplified by the life of Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, a former chief of staff to Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and longtime pastor of Canaan Baptist Church in Harlem, New York. The class will focus on Walker's early years in central Virginia and the context of twentieth-century racial segregation; crucial episodes in the Civil Rights Movement in which Walker played a crucial role alongside King; his leadership in the political, economic and civic arenas while serving as pastor of Canaan Baptist Church; his scholarly interest in the Black Church and in particular his sacred music; and his involvement in global human rights activism including the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa. Throughout the course we will return to these questions: what does a life devoted to creative and sustained struggle for social justice look like? How did Walker conceptualize and practice *leadership*, in different settings? What lessons might Walker's life hold for social justice struggles and democratic renewal today? Assignments will include engagement with scholarly secondary literature as well as primary sources held by the University of Richmond's Wyatt Tee Walker collection, and classroom sessions will include frequent conversations with former associates of Walker and other leaders working in similar spaces.

Learning Outcomes

This course covers a lot of material, and will raise many specific questions. Overarching learning outcomes include (but are not limited to):

1. Increased understanding of the U.S. civil rights movement and the institutional and cultural contexts that shaped it, including specifically the Black Church and Christian theology but also other influences; and including also the background context of systemic racism in which the movement was formed
2. Understanding the strategic framework and specific choices civil rights leaders adopted to advance their aims
3. Understanding why Wyatt Tee Walker and other leaders saw local, national and global issues as linked
4. Understanding the contributions of Walker to the re-imagining of American democracy as an inclusive, multiracial democracy marked by greater social, civic, and economic equality
5. Coming to an understanding of Walker's character, intellectual framework, and habits of mind; and how they contrasted with or complemented those of other civil rights leaders with whom Walker was associated
6. Reflecting upon the lessons from Walker's lifelong commitment, successes and disappointments upon how students might shape their own lives.

We also hope in the course to show how dialogue across racial, gender, generational and other differences in identity and life experience can fruitfully shed light on both the challenges facing American democracy as well as possible pathways towards change. We invite all students to be full participants in this journey and aim to create an environment in which all students can draw on their respective backgrounds and experiences to contribute to this conversation.

Course format

The course meets from 9 am to 11:40 a.m. each Friday. We will begin each class period with a piece of music relevant to the time period and events under discussion that week. The first half of each class period will be in standard academic format of guided discussion. Each student will be responsible for a brief presentation concerning the week's readings at least once during the semester. We will break at approximately 10:15 each week.

The second part of the course, from 10:30 to 11:40, will consist of either a visit with a guest speaker; a film excerpt; or time spent examining archival material from the University's Dr. and Mrs. Wyatt Tee Walker Collection.

General Course Expectations

To succeed in this course, you will need to meet several core expectations. These are not optional and not negotiable.

- You must attend every class (arriving on time—i.e. two minutes early).
- You must prepare for class by doing the assigned reading in a thoughtful manner, prior to class
- You must be attentive in class
- You must make an effort to participate in class discussions
- You must complete the written assignments on time

In addition, it is also highly advisable that you:

- Visit the instructors periodically in office hours, especially when you have questions
- Take good notes both while reading and in class
- Review those notes after each class session
- Write down questions as you are reading you would like to raise in class
- Spend time with your classmates talking about the ideas in the reading outside of class time

Finally, there are a few key classroom comportment rules we will observe:

- All phones must be turned off and put away before entering the classroom, and must stay off until you leave the classroom. Laptops are permissible exclusively for the purpose of taking notes, but if you use a laptop you should maintain eye contact with the instructor and must not have other windows open on your desktop.
- You should go to the bathroom prior to class and not get up in the middle of class to go, barring a genuine emergency
- Don't bring food into the classroom, but beverages are acceptable provided you dispose of them appropriately after class
- Pay both the professor and your classmates the respect of listening to what they have to say. The way to indicate you are listening is through periodic eye contact.

Developing Thinking, Reading and Writing Skills

Learning to Read for College

Reading must be the fundamental default activity of all college students. When you are not doing anything else, you should be reading. This class will require that you do a lot of reading. In your first year of college as a whole, it's likely you will be asked to read more serious, demanding books than you've read in your entire life to this point.

We live in a culture that has devalued deep reading and thinking. Why then read books, as opposed to just a series of short articles or excerpts? Because books are still the best technology we have for allowing a sophisticated train of thought—or body of knowledge—to be communicated from one human mind to another. A book allows the author to explore an event, person, or question in sustained depth, to present a sustained argument supported by evidence, to make connections between different events or phenomena, or to explore all sides of a disputed question thoroughly. Or a book may simply expand or stimulate our imaginations, our moral consciences, our sense of what is possible in human life. To read an interesting, important, or imagination-expanding book is one of life's great pleasures—but it is a pleasure it takes effort to cultivate. Think of reading a book as engaging your mind with someone else's mind in an extended, in-depth conversation. If your reading takes the form of a thoughtful, internal conversation with the author, when it comes time to write your papers—your actual chance to “talk back” to the author and his or her ideas—you won't be struggling to generate material from scratch; instead you will simply be transcribing and refining the conversation you've already had in your brain. Good writing is fundamentally a result of good thinking, and good thinking comes about via the practice and habit of being in conversation with good thinkers—such as the authors we will be reading this semester.

But how then to read thoughtfully?

- First, cut out the distractions. Turn off social media, the Internet, and anything else that might tempt you to turn your mind away from what you are reading. Find a quiet space where you can concentrate fully on the text.
- Second, set yourself an attainable goal for how long you will concentrate fully on reading the text. Whether it's thirty minutes, an hour, or two hours, set a goal, and stick to that goal, with the aim of increasing it over time. If you can learn how to sit in the library or somewhere for three consecutive hours, reading for 45-50 minutes at a time, then taking 10-15 minute breaks each hour, you will over the course of the week get a lot done—and more importantly, have a lot of fruitful conversations with great thinkers and writers.
- Third, take notes as you go—either in the text margins, or in a notebook. This is helpful in keeping track of the author's train of thought, and will help you remember arguments and key points when you go back to review or re-read.
- Fourth, when you are done reading a section, write down a few key points the author made, or alternatively some questions you have about the author's arguments.
- Fifth, as you are reading, think not just about the face value arguments of the text, but also about the author's intended audience and purpose. Why and for whom was this book written? Being able to answer that question often is very helpful in understanding the text as a whole.

- Sixth—and this is the most advanced skill, and one that will take time to master—think *critically* about what you are reading. Even the most brilliant texts, texts that have impeccable internal logic and that will make you smarter simply by reading them, have limitations of perspective and purpose. What does a text written in the 19th century about the human condition have to say that is of enduring value to *us* today? Frederick Douglass can't answer that question—it is our job as students to engage that question ourselves.

Jepson School of Leadership Studies Common Course Policies

Awarding of Credit

To be successful in this course, a student should expect to devote 10-14 hours each week, including class time and time spent on course-related activities.

registrar.richmond.edu/services/policies/academic-credit.html

Disability Accommodations

Students with a Disability Accommodation Notice should contact their instructors as early in the semester as possible to discuss arrangements for completing course assignments and exams.

disability.richmond.edu/

Honor System

The Jepson School supports the provisions of the Honor System. The shortened version of the honor pledge is: “I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.” studentdevelop.m.ent.richmond.edu/student-handbook/honor/the-honor-code.html

Religious Observance

Students should notify their instructors within the first two weeks of classes if they will need accommodations for religious observance. registrar.richmond.edu/planning/religiousobs.html

Addressing Microaggressions on Campus

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. Recent research has found that, when professors do not address microaggressions in class, microaggressions foster alienation of marginalized groups. Furthermore, both students and faculty that are exposed to microaggressions more often are more likely to have depressive symptoms and negative affect (a negative view of the world). A comfortable and productive environment where meaningful learning happens can be collectively created through actions, words, or environmental cues that promote the inclusion and success of marginalized members, recognizing their embodied identity, validating their realities, resisting sexism, ableism, and racism.

With this in mind, as community members at the University of Richmond, we pledge to address microaggressions in the classroom by holding myself, other students, and faculty accountable for what is said and being receptive to criticism when perpetuating these slights, snubs, or insults. Additional resources available to students include *Spiders Against Bias*, the *Bias Response Team*, and a workshop series this semester titled *Not So Slight: Combatting mAcroaggressions*.

Sensitive and Offensive Material Warning and Class Policy

In this course we are reading historical and literary documents concerning some of the most painful aspects of the American experience, including but not limited to racism, sexism, and violence. It will be our class policy not to use or repeat profanity, racial epithets, or other patently offensive terms, even when they are used in texts or textual passages we are discussing.

Note on Class Evaluations

Student course evaluations will be completed in-class on the last day of the semester. Bring a laptop to the final day of class. All students are requested to complete the evaluation. Your participation is helpful in improving pedagogy and effective learning in the Jepson School.

General grading standards:

- A range grades are given for truly outstanding written work that not only meets the basic requirements of the given assignment but also demonstrates exceptional insight, clarity, and depth of thought. For instance, an A-range paper will not simply forward a coherent argument, but also anticipate and attempt to answer likely objections to the argument, and/or acknowledge points at which one's argument might be vulnerable. Such papers will also be very well-organized and well-written, and gracefully presented.
- B range grades are given for good and very good written work which amply meets all the basic requirements of the given assignment and reflects substantial effort and engagement with the material. Such work is generally well-written and well-organized, shows good understanding of the course material, and avoids major substantive or logical errors. *B is a good grade for any assignment in this course, and B+ is a very good grade.*
- C range grades are given for work which attempts to fulfill the requirements of the assignment but which falls short in some substantial way, with respect to organization, writing quality, understanding of the material, or argumentative logic.
- D and F grades are reserved for work which comes nowhere close to meeting the requirements of the assignment.

Assignments & Evaluation

- Students must attend and actively participate each week. No absences permitted except for illness or truly extraordinary circumstances. **Do not plan travel out of town for the weekend Friday morning; this is not a valid excuse for missing class, ever.**
- Students are responsible for a *short*, weekly "Four Things" response to be posted to Blackboard prior to each class meeting, beginning the second week of class. Note four facts, arguments, observations, or questions from the week's reading that you believe are significant, and explain in 2-3 sentences (per item) why you think it is significant.
- Students are responsible for at least one in-class presentation of reading, including preparation of notes and a reading outline for distribution to fellow students. **(20% Course Grade: Attendance, participation, weekly papers, in-class presentation)**
- There will be a one hour mid-term exam on October 8. **(20% Course Grade)**
- Students will prepare a final project that may be a term paper (minimum length 12 pages) or a multimedia presentation of equivalent depth. Presentations of approximately 15 minutes will take place the last day of class. **(30% Course Grade)**
- Final comprehensive exam, consisting of both an in-person test and a take-home essay **(30% Course Grade).**

Plan of Study

Course Books for Purchase

Henry Louis Gates, *The Black Church*

Thomas Holt, *The Movement*

Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*

Other materials to be distributed via PDF or loaned library copies:

Wyatt Tee Walker, *The African Presence in the Bible and Other Essays*

Wyatt Tee Walker, *Someone is Calling My Name*

Wyatt Tee Walker, *Occasional Papers of a Revolutionary*

Wyatt Tee Walker, *Common Thieves!*

Wyatt Tee Walker, *Road to Damascus: A Journey of Faith*

Wyatt Tee Walker, *Soweto Diary: The Free Elections in South Africa*

Wyatt Tee Walker, *A Prophet from Harlem Speaks*

Wyatt Tee Walker, *Oral History Interviews* (2016)

Section One: Groundings and Historical Context

Week 1 August 27. Read: Gates, *The Black Church*, Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2

Week 2. September 3. Read Gates, *The Black Church*, Chapters 3, 4, and Epilogue; Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Chapter 2 (Fear); Walker, *African Presence in the Bible*, Chapter 8.

VMFA “The Dirty South” Field Trip

Section Two: Civil Rights Movement

Week 3. September 10. Read Holt, *The Movement*, Chapters 1-3; Walker, *African Presence in the Bible*, Chapters 5 and 6; Walker, *Oral History* (2016) 1/2

Guest Speakers: Patrice Walker Powell (daughter of Wyatt Tee Walker) and Beth Hopkins (Wake Forest University School of Law Emerita)

Week 4. September 17. Read Holt, *The Movement*, Chapters 4-6; Walker, *African Presence in the Bible*, Chapter 7; Walker, *Oral History* (2016) 2/2

Classroom Visitor: Laurant Lee (University of Richmond, Jepson School); Archival Research

Week 5. September 24. Read McWhorter, Chapters 1-10

Guest Speaker: Gill Hickman (University of Richmond, Jepson School Emerita, and Rev. Michael Hickman)

Week 6. October 1. Read McWhorter, Chapters 11-20;

Archival Research. Classroom exercise with archival materials (analysis of Birmingham transcripts).

Week 7. October 8. Read McWhorter, Chapters 21-30.

Mid-Term Exam

Fall Break

Section Three: Canaan Baptist Church

Weeks 8. **October 15.** Read Walker, *Common Thieves!* pp. 1-43, 69-75

Guest Speakers: Rev. Tyrone Nelson, Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, Richmond; Rev. Yvonne Bibbs, Sixth Baptist Church, Richmond

Week 9. **October 22.** Read Walker, *Occasional Notes of a Revolutionary; Black Church and Economic Development. Occasional Notes of a Revolutionary;* pp. vi-x; 1-18; 29-53; 61-63; 75-85; 87-98; 115-123; 139-146

Guest Speaker: Andrea Simpson, University of Richmond (Political Science)

Section Four: The Black Church and Sacred Music

Week 10. **October 29.** Read Walker, *Somebody's Calling My Name.* pp. 37-72; 127-159

Guest Speaker: Ronald A. Crutcher, University of Richmond (President Emeritus)

Week 11. **November 5.** Read Walker, *A Prophet from Harlem Speaks.* pp. 65-111. **Archival Research**

Section Five: Global Activism

Speakers:

Week 12. **November 12.** Read Walker, *Road to Damascus;*

Guest speaker: Corey D.B. Walker, Wake Forest University Professor of the Humanities

Week 13. **November 19.** Read Walker, *Notes on Soweto.*

Workshop on Student Presentations

Section Six: Student Original Presentations Based on Archival Research

Week 14. **December 3.** **Student Presentations**

Invite local class guests and community members to hear student presentations

Final project due Monday December 6, 5 p.m.

FINAL EXAM Friday December 10, 9 a.m., in-class portion. (Take-home essay to be distributed Monday December 6 at 5 pm, due Monday December 13 at 5 pm.)

Additional Academic Resources

If you experience difficulties in this course, do not hesitate to consult with us. There are also other resources that can support you in your efforts to meet course requirements.

Academic Skills Center (asc.richmond.edu): Academic coaches assist students in assessing and developing their academic and life-skills (e.g., critical reading and thinking, information conceptualization, concentration, test preparation, time management, stress management, etc.). Peer tutors offer assistance in specific subject areas (e.g., calculus, chemistry, accounting, etc.) and will be available for appointments in-person and virtually. Peer tutors are listed on the ASC website. Email [Roger Mancastroppa \(Rmancast@richmond.edu\)](mailto:Rmancast@richmond.edu) and [Hope Walton \(Hwalton@richmond.edu\)](mailto:Hwalton@richmond.edu) for coaching appointments in academic and life skills.

Boatwright Library Research Librarians: (library.richmond.edu/help/ask/ or 289-8876): Research librarians help students with all steps of their research, from identifying or narrowing a topic, to locating, accessing, evaluating, and citing information resources. Librarians support students in their classes across the curriculum and provide individual appointments, class library instruction, tutorials, and [research guides](http://libguides.richmond.edu) (libguides.richmond.edu). Students can [contact an individual librarian](http://library.richmond.edu/help/liaison-librarians.html) (library.richmond.edu/help/liaison-librarians.html) or ASK a librarian for help via email (library@richmond.edu), text (804-277-9ASK), or [chat](http://library.richmond.edu/chat.html) (library.richmond.edu/chat.html).

Career Services: (careerservices.richmond.edu or 289-8547): Can assist you in exploring your interests and abilities, choosing a major or course of study, connecting with internships and jobs, and investigating graduate and professional school options. We encourage you to schedule an appointment with a career advisor early in your time at UR.

Counseling and Psychological Services (caps.richmond.edu or 289-8119): Assists currently enrolled, full-time, degree-seeking students in improving their mental health and well-being, and in handling challenges that may impede their growth and development. Services include brief consultations, short-term counseling and psychotherapy, skills-building classes, crisis intervention, psychiatric consultation, and related services.

Disability Services (disability.richmond.edu) The Office of Disability Services works to ensure that qualified students with a disability (whether incoming or current) are provided with reasonable accommodations that enable students to participate fully in activities, programs, services and benefits provided to all students. Please let your professors know as soon as possible if you have an accommodation that requires academic coordination and planning.

Speech Center (speech.richmond.edu or 287-6409): Assists with preparation and practice in the pursuit of excellence in public expression. Recording, playback, coaching and critique sessions offered by teams of student consultants trained to assist in developing ideas, arranging key points for more effective organization, improving style and delivery, and handling multimedia aids for individual and group presentations. Remote practice sessions can be arranged; we look forward to meeting your public speaking needs.

Writing Center (writing.richmond.edu or 289-8263): Assists writers at all levels of experience, across all majors. Students can schedule appointments with trained writing consultants who offer friendly critiques of written work.