

The Politics of “WE”: Is America still possible? Sandra Bass

At the center of this vision is a dream of a land that does not yet exist and a vision of its creation placed in the hands of very ordinary men and women. ~ Vincent Harding

The founding narrative of the United States of America asserts that we are a country forged together by our belief in lofty political ideals, yet this narrative is not wholly accurate. From our inception who and what constitutes who “WE” are: who is included and excluded, who has voice and who is silenced, who has access to the promises of the “American Dream” and who does not, has been at the center of our centuries long struggle to create a genuine democracy. This question of who constitutes “WE” in America is at the forefront of our current political moment, a moment that has been fraught with untruths, vitriol, hate, and violence.

Social and political change is an ecosystem with multiple actors playing multiple roles. This course will focus on one aspect of that ecosystem: social change strategies that are intentionally designed to build a bigger, more inclusive, “WE” and the community organizations and leaders who are utilizing these strategies (e.g. shifting narratives and viewpoints, deep canvassing and relational organizing, organizing and mobilizing networks, activating the “sacred feminine”, and intergenerational action and wisdom sharing) in their work. In doing so, this course hopes to ignite a conversation with participants about whether America is still possible and if so, what must we do and who must we become to realize that vision.

September 23: The contested “WE”

We’ll briefly talk about the circumstances that have led us to this current fractious moment and discuss research, theories, and practices that suggest a way forward

Suggested Reading:

Articles

[When America Became a Democracy](#), The Atlantic

[The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging](#) john powell and Stephen Menendian

Books

The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together, Heather McGhee

Hegemony How to: A Roadmap for Radicals, Jonathan Smucker

September 30: Be Woke: Vote

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) changed the landscape of electoral politics in America. However as the provisions of the VRA have been eroded, dozens of states have passed or are considering voting restrictions. Yet, we are also seeing voting rights activists deploying new strategies to reach historically disenfranchised voters, and winning. We’ll talk about current voter suppression activities, HR1 which aims to protect the vote, and organizations that are experiencing significant success by utilizing relational organizing and other strategies.

Community Guest: Claudia Jimenez, Richmond City Council Member, Richmond Progressive Alliance

Suggested Readings

Articles

[House Democrats' Massive Voting Rights Bill Explained](#)
[Virginia, The Old Confederacy's Heart Becomes a Voting Rights Bastion](#)

Book

Our Time is Now, Stacey Abrams

October 7, Reimagining Community Safety

The police murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 sparked widespread public outrage and months of protest. Activists, weary with numerous incidents of police killings, have called for the defunding of police and the abolition of prisons. But what does that mean in practice? We'll look the role of police in our society, mass incarceration, and discuss what reimagining community safety might look like

Community Guest: Zachary Norris, Ella Baker Center for Human Rights

Suggested Readings

Article

[Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind](#), New York Times, Rachel Kushner
[The Narrative Power of "Abolish The Police"](#) Vox, Emily VanDerWerff

Book

Defund Fear: Zachary Norris

October 14 Confronting White Nationalism and the Far Right

White nationalism and white supremacist recruitment, organizing, and violence has surged across the country. For this session we'll talk about the surge in white supremacist and nationalist organizing and talk about efforts to "counter organize" against this movement.

Community Guests: Scot Nakagawa, Change Labs

Suggested Readings

Articles

[Capital Insurrection, White Nationalism, and Reconciliation](#), Bitterroot Magazine
[The Neo Nazi who became an Anti Nazi](#)
[How to talk someone out of bigotry](#) Vox, Brian Resnick

Blog

[We Fight the Right](#), Scot Nakagawa

Books

Breaking Hate: Confronting The New Culture of Extremism, Christian Piccolini

Healing from Hate: How Young Men, Get Into and Out of Violent Extremism, Michael Kimmel

October 21 There is no climate justice without racial and gender justice

The problem of climate change intersects with many other social justice concerns. In this session we'll talk about the intersections between climate, racial, and gender justice and how women and the "sacred feminine" are central to any effort to address this existential threat to life on the planet.

Community Guests: Marla Marcum, Climate Defense Project and Cristobal Van Breen, the Yet to Be Named Network

Suggested readings:

Article

[These women are transforming what climate leadership looks like](#), Time Magazine Naina Bajekal and Elijah Wolfson

Books

Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger, Julie Sze
This Changes Everything, Naomi Klein

October 28 Is America still possible? Adulting, Eldership and intergenerational movement building

Intergenerational movement building is both a strategy and a worthwhile end in and of itself. In our last session together we'll circle back to Vincent Harding's original query - is American possible? - and suggest that intergenerational action and wisdom sharing is critical for recognizing our interdependence and realizing our vision of an America where everyone belongs.

Community Guests: Gerald Lenior, Othering and Belonging Institute; Aryeh Shell, Equity, Resilience, Transformation consultant <https://aryehshell.com/>

Suggested Readings

Article

[Is America Possible?](#) Vincent Harding

Books

Education in Black and White, Myles Horton and the Highlander Center's Vision for Social Justice, Stephen Preskill

Hope and History: Why We Must Share The Story of The Movement, Vincent Harding

Daring Democracy: Igniting Power, Meaning, and Connection for the America We Want, Frances Moore Lappe and Adam Eichen ([This video is a good introduction to their book](#))