Encountering Martin Luther King, Jr.

Few historical figures are more revered or transcendent than Martin Luther King, Jr. But as David Levering Lewis wrote almost forty years ago, America’s canonization of King has draped him in such a cloak of mythology that “in a sense we have sought to remember him by forgetting him.” This course will seek to vividly remember the human being at the center of the most significant popular movement in US history, one that took up the unfinished legacy of the Civil War and Reconstruction 80 years after the nation turned its back on social and racial justice. Students will explore King’s thought, oratory, character, and public actions at a depth that will make him unforgettable to them. We will consider his tenaciously held philosophy of nonviolent social change, and his growth from a southern Baptist minister to a leading civil rights activist, and to a visionary leader of global human rights and peace. We will ask how do we understand him in the context of his times, amidst fellow activists, adversaries, elected leaders, and critics during one of the most volatile, freedom-advancing periods of American history? And we will pay close attention to King’s final three years, a period in which he became increasingly marginalized, lost support among white liberals as well as black radicals, but in the face of war and racism held firmly to his deeply-held non-violent philosophy. Using film and little-known interviews as part of the class research, as well a challenging immersion in some of the most significant King literature, the course, coming in the 50th anniversary year of King’s assassination, will make King and his times newly relevant to our own changed but still violence-prone and haunted world.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

Students will be evaluated on their attendance at classes, completion of assigned readings, participation in classroom discussion and presentations, and the writing of brief response papers and a midterm and final paper. The two papers and one shorter piece of writing will explore questions of the student’s choice from the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. These papers will be evaluated on a demonstration of student mastery of course content, originality, clarity of writing, personal style, and general acumen. All work will be the student’s own, and follow NYU guidelines. Extensions ordinarily will not be granted. While grading involves judgment and insight into a student’s overall engagement with the course, the following schema may be helpful to those interested in knowing how their efforts will be evaluated and final grades arrived at.

- Class participation: 15%
- Student presentations and personal writing: 10%
- Short first paper (2-3 pages): 15%
Mid term paper (5-7 pages) 20%
Final paper (10-12 pages) 40%

REQUIRED TEXTS

The following books will be required for the course, and will be available for purchase at the NYU Bookstore.

A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., Harper Collins, 1991

Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963, Simon and Schuster, 1989

Taylor Branch, At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968, Simon and Schuster, 2006

[Video materials will also be studied in class.]

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

---Week 1---
1/25 Welcome, and introduction to the study of Martin Luther King, Jr.

---Week 2---
2/1 King's Early life (1928-1954)
Assigned Reading: Parting the Waters, 42-142

---Week 3---
2/8 “Stride Toward Freedom” (1955-1956)
Assigned Reading: Parting the Waters, 143-205; King, 418-438

---Week 4---
Assigned Reading: Parting the Waters, 206-311; King, 23-30, 35-40, 41-42
Paper #1 due in class

---Week 5---
2/22 The Kennedy Transition (1960-1961)
Assigned Reading: Parting the Waters, 312-411

---Week 6---
3/1 Freedom Riders (1961)
Assigned Reading: Parting the Waters, 412-491; King, 43-53
--- Week 7 ---
3/8  Protests in the South … and J. Edgar Hoover (1962)  
Assigned Reading: Parting the Waters, 492-523, 562-600; King 99-105

--- 3/15 NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK

--- Week 8 ---
3/22  Birmingham (1963)  
Assigned Reading: Parting the Waters, 708-755; King 289-302

--- Week 9 ---
3/29  The Children's Miracle (1963)  
Assigned Reading: Parting the Waters, 756-845; King 117-125  
Mid-Term Paper due in class

--- Week 10 ---
4/5  The March on Washington (1963)  
Assigned Reading: Parting the Waters, 846-887; King 217-220

4/9  Special evening film: “King: In the Wilderness,” at Skirball, 6:30-9:00pm

--- Week 11 ---
4/12  King in the North (1966)  
Assigned Reading: At Canaan’s Edge, pp. 501-559

--- Week 12 ---
4/19  Anti-War Activist (1967)  
Assigned Reading: At Canaan’s Edge, pp. 581-656; King 231-244, 634-653

--- Week 13 ---
4/26  To Memphis (1968)  
Assigned Reading: At Canaan’s Edge, pp. 657-722  
Final Paper due in class

--- Week 14 ---
5/3  “True to the End” (1968)  
Assigned Reading: At Canaan’s Edge, pp. 723-771; King, 279-288

PHILIP KUNHARDT is Distinguished Scholar in Residence in the Humanities, and teaches history and biography in the College of Arts and Science. He focuses on the lives of transformative figures and has co-authored six books, including The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln (2015), Looking for Lincoln (2008), and The American President (1999). He was also writer and co-producer of more than a dozen documentary films for PBS, ABC, HBO, Discovery, and others, including the ten-part PBS series The American President (2000), and the sixteen part Freedom: A History of US. Before coming to NYU in 2010 he was a Bard Center Fellow at Bard College in Annandale, New York.