ENCOUNTERING FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Few figures in American history are as compelling or inspiring as the former-slave-turned-abolitionist-editor Frederick Douglass, whose eloquence and moral passion resonate still. A complex and at times conflicted figure, his life intersected with some of the most interesting and charged characters of his age, including Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, and many others. This seminar will take a deep and sustained look at the life of this American prophet, probing his thought and character and examining his trajectory through a freighted era. Though he claimed to have written with “the ragged style of a slave’s pen,” he is now considered one of the most important and original writers of the 19th century. Students will read a selection of his works, as well as several biographies and scholarly treatments, and will explore important questions in the light of Douglass’s thinking, for example: How does the religion of slaves relate to the religion of slave-holders? Is there a legitimate use of violence in the pursuit of noble ends? Does there exist, as Douglass believed, a force of progress in history? How do self-awareness, moral insight, and public eloquence undergird the effectiveness of a reformer?

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

Students will be evaluated on their attendance at classes, completion of assigned readings, participation in classroom discussion, and writing of a series of brief response papers and a midterm and final paper. The midterm paper will look at Frederick Douglass in conjunction with one other leading figure of his times. The final paper will explore a question of the student’s choice. In addition to intensive and at times quite personal group discussion we will also pay attention to the visual record of Douglass’s life and times.

Written work and presentations

All work will be the student’s own, and follow NYU guidelines. Extensions ordinarily will not be granted. Two papers and one shorter piece of writing will explore questions of the student’s choice from the life and leadership of Abraham Lincoln. 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 (including in-class exercises and presentations) 30%
Short first paper (3-4 pages) 15%
Mid term paper (5-7 pages) 20%
Final paper (10 pages) 35%

**REQUIRED TEXTS**

The following books will be available at the NYU Bookstore:


**SCHEDULE OF CLASSES**

1. 1/26 Welcome, and Introduction to the Study of Frederick Douglass  
   Assigned Reading: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 13-54

2. 2/02 “Life as a Slave”  
   [1818-1832]  

3. 2/09 “The Last Flogging”  
   [1833-1842]  
   Assigned Reading: Narrative, 55-86; McFeely, 40-90; My Bondage, 150-243  
   First short paper due
4. 2/16 “Life As a Freeman”  [1843-1850]  
Assigned Readings: McFeely, 90-162; My Bondage, 247-298; Foner, 17-20; 76-82; 97-99; 1-2-3; 129-134. Philip Foner, Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings, 17-20, 76-82, 97-99, 123, 129-134, 158-163

5. 2/23 The Impending Crisis  [1850-1859]  
Assigned Readings: McFeely 163-200; Frederick Douglass, The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, 184-232; Foner, 171-4, 176-8, 188-206; 207-210; 275; 281; 298-332; 335-6; 344-358; 374-8; 376-8; 379; 390-2; 393-6; 396-7

6. 3/02 Two Trajectories  
Assigned Reading: James Oakes, The Radical and the Republican, xiii-xxii, 3-132; Foner, 413-17, 417-21, 429-32, 432-39, 443-45, 470-74

7. 3/09 FIELD TRIP TO ARCHIVES  
Assigned Reading: Oakes 133-208  
[MID TERM PAPERS DUE]

3/16 SPRING BREAK NO CLASS

8. 3/23 The Trumpet of Jubilee  [1860-1865]  
Assigned Reading: McFeely, 200-237; Oakes 209-245; Foner, 517-520; 540-543; 547-554

9. 3/30 “The Moral Universe”  
Assigned Reading: David W. Blight: Frederick Douglass’ Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee, 1-79

10. 4/06 “The Doom of the Slave Power”  [1863-1865]  
Assigned Reading: Blight, 80-188; Foner, 554-567, 571-573

11. 4/13 “Had Lincoln Lived”  [1865-1872]  
Assigned Reading: Oakes, 247-288; McFeely 238-273; Blight, 189-218: Life and Times, 232-276

12. 4/20 A Life of Public Service [1872-1878]  
Life and Times 233-296; McFeely 274-333

13. 4/27 “The Lesson of the Hour”  [1878-1881]  
Assignrede Reading: Life and Times, 340-351, 375-405; Foner, 627-633; 633-648; 648-656  
[FINAL PAPERS DUE]

14. 5/04 Elder Statesman  [1883-1895]
Assigned Reading: McFeely, 333-386; Blight, 219-245; Life and Times, 405-453; Foner 685-693, 694-695, 706-711; 712-722; 750-776

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 five books, including Looking for Lincoln (2008), The American President (1999), and P.T. Barnum: America’s Greatest Showman (1995). 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.