

English 297H: Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement

Professor Jack Selzer (jls25@psu.edu)

This course meets Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays (12:20-1:10) during January and February. It concludes with a Spring Break “road trip” to key civil rights sites March 8-15. Students will have completed the course and its assignments by the end of March.

Costs: Specific full scholarship support has been secured for five students interested in the African-American Studies program; other scholarship full support is available for students interested in the English major or minor; and costs to other students should also be modest, thanks to financial support from many university sponsors, including Schreyer Honors College, the Paterno Fellows Program, the Center for Democratic Deliberation, and the Paterno Family Liberal Arts Professorship. It is anticipated that all participants will enjoy free transportation, admission to sites, and motel/hotel accommodations, as well as one meal per day and complementary breakfasts.

This honors course, designed to meet general education humanities requirements, to satisfy the U. S. Cultures requirement, and to attract Schreyer Scholars, Paterno Fellows aspirants, and other interested and ambitious Liberal Arts undergraduates, has several related features. (The course has been approved as meeting the gen ed Humanities requirement for Liberal Arts students; a proposal is pending that would permit to course to meet the U. S. Cultures requirement as well.)

English 297H is built around a class trip to civil rights sites during Spring Break. Among other places, the bus tour will take us to a number of storied locations: Washington DC and the Lincoln Memorial, site of the August 28, 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom; Greensboro, North Carolina, where the student sit-in movement began in 1960; Highlander Folk School in the mountains of Tennessee, where civil rights workers were trained in non-violence; Atlanta, where King’s Ebenezer Baptist Church and the Martin Luther King National Historical Site dominate the “Sweet Auburn” District; Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery, Alabama, the sites of three of the most celebrated civil rights campaigns; and many places in between and in addition. In the bargain students will have the opportunity to meet personally with important surviving veterans of the Freedom Struggle, and they will have ample opportunity for discussions and activities designed to deepen their understanding of a most important episode in American history. (For example, legendary SNCC worker Bob Zellner will meet with the class on his visit to Penn State on February 4.)

Students will prepare for the trip in January and February by making a sustained inquiry into the rhetorical activities that accompanied the Civil Rights Movement in the United States during its “classic” period: from about 1954 until about 1975. Considering the civil rights movement as a struggle conducted through words and symbols (though certainly not only through words and symbols), we will study important documents and speeches by central figures in the movement (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, Stokely Carmichael and Fannie Lou Hamer); anthems and songs and other kinds of performances; the deployment of bodies in various persuasive ways (e.g., lunch counter protests, sit ins and sit downs, marches, boycotts, Freedom Rides); poetry and fiction; photography and other forms of visual rhetoric; and the rhetorical activities connected with the key events and groups – e.g., the murder of Emmett Till, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the

Birmingham campaign, the March on Washington, Freedom Summer, the Selma to Montgomery march, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panthers – that are associated with this vital episode in American civic life.

Third, students will learn how to perform their own sophisticated inquiries into subjects and places relevant to the course topic and contribute their findings to the course Web site. The centerpiece project will consist of a scholarly rhetorical analysis of a piece of civil rights rhetoric that emerges from students' independent research. All students will leave the course with a mature and sophisticated class project that they can be proud of. **Students will have completed the course and its assignments by the end of March, leaving them ample time later in the term to focus on other courses.**

For more information, consult the course instructor:

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