

STUDY GUIDE

THE MOUNTAIN TOP

by
Katori
Hall

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THE MOUNTAINTOP

By Katori Hall

STUDY GUIDE

Adapted with permission from Milwaukee Repertory Theater's study guide and written by Nitasha Rajoo

Recommended for grade 11 and up

Content Advisory

Mature themes, coarse and strong language, sexual innuendo;
deals with issues of oppression, including racism; conversations about death and dying.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRO	3
CHARACTERS.....	3
SETTING	3
PLAYWRIGHT KATORI HALL.....	4
INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR AUDREY DWYER	5
DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.....	6
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT TIMELINE.....	8
PRE-SHOW DISCUSSION	10
HUMANIZING A HERO – ACTIVITY	11
“I’VE BEEN TO THE MOUNTAINTOP.”	13
SPEECH AND LANGUAGE – LISTENING ACTIVITY.....	14
PASSING THE BATON – WRITING ACTIVITY	14
SYMBOLISM OF COSTUME – ACTIVITY	15
POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION.....	16
VOCABULARY	17
CAST & CREATIVE TEAM	19
WORKSHOPS.....	20
RESOURCES	21

INTRO

After his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., retires to his room in the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He is tired, overwrought, in need of clarity, and deeply questioning both the success of and his value to the Civil Rights movement.

Camae, a beautiful young hotel maid, enters. She is as awed by Dr. King's fame as he is by her beauty. The chemistry between them sparks immediately, and Dr. King invites her to sit and talk for a while. Their ensuing conversation, lasting throughout the long `night, covers topics both personal and political—from Dr. King's children, to the Memphis Sanitation Strike, to a debate about violent versus non-violent revolution.

As the evening progresses, Camae grows more mysterious, revealing thoughts and events about which only Dr. King could know. As it becomes increasingly clear that Camae is more than just an ordinary maid, she leads Dr. King through a powerful, vivid exploration of his life and legacy on what would become his final night on earth.

(Reprinted with permission from Milwaukee Repertory Theater's *The Mountaintop* Study Guide (2012). Visit <https://issuu.com/milwaukeeerep/docs/mountaintop-studyguide> to read more.)

CHARACTERS

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – Civil Rights Leader

Camae – A maid at the Lorraine Motel

SETTING

April 3, 1968. Room 306 at the Lorraine Motel, Memphis, Tennessee.



PLAYWRIGHT KATORI HALL



Katori Hall is a playwright and performer from Memphis, Tennessee. Her work has been produced on Broadway, in London's West End, and in regional theaters throughout the United States.

As an African-American growing up in a predominately white neighborhood, Hall was very aware of racial issues and the legacy of the civil rights movement as a child. She was raised in a working-class household, the youngest of four daughters. In 2003, she graduated from Columbia University and continued her training at Harvard and Julliard.

While training as an actor at Columbia, Hall felt a lack of roles for African-American women. At that moment, she knew she had to write. Today, Katori Hall's published plays include *The Mountaintop*, *Hoodoo Love*, *Hurt Village*, and *Saturday Night/Sunday Morning*.

The Mountaintop was inspired by Hall's mother, Carrie Mae Golden. In 1968, Carrie Mae asked her mother if she could go to hear Dr. King speak at the Mason Temple. Her mother did not let her go because she feared that the church would be bombed. The female character in *The Mountaintop*, Camae (short for Carrie Mae), is named for Katori Hall's mother, giving her the chance she never had to meet Dr. King.

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INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR AUDREY DWYER



What inspires and excites you to direct *The Mountaintop*?

I'm inspired by Katori Hall's story and how she uses Realism and Black Magical Realism to get her story across. I'm very excited by the theatricality she's asking us to play with. I'm inspired by the theme of transformation.

Can you share your artistic insight into the production?

I feel that at the heart of this play is the need for transformation. The play, itself, transforms. I feel that Katori Hall is not only asking questions about racial justice, civil rights, war and legacy. She is examining the route that one must take in order to transform oneself. From human to heavenly body and from life to death are two that are clear within the play.

Do you have a favourite line that stands out in the play?

"Don't know where in the race we are, but pick up that baton and pass, pass, pass it along."
– King

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a Black Civil Rights Leader who is reverently studied in schools. What is it about Dr. King in this play that you hope young audiences take away?

He was a human, just like you and me. Katori's version of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is shown warts and all. He's not perfect. That was very important to her.

Can you describe Camae in five words?

Bold. Playful. Direct. Powerful. Hilarious.

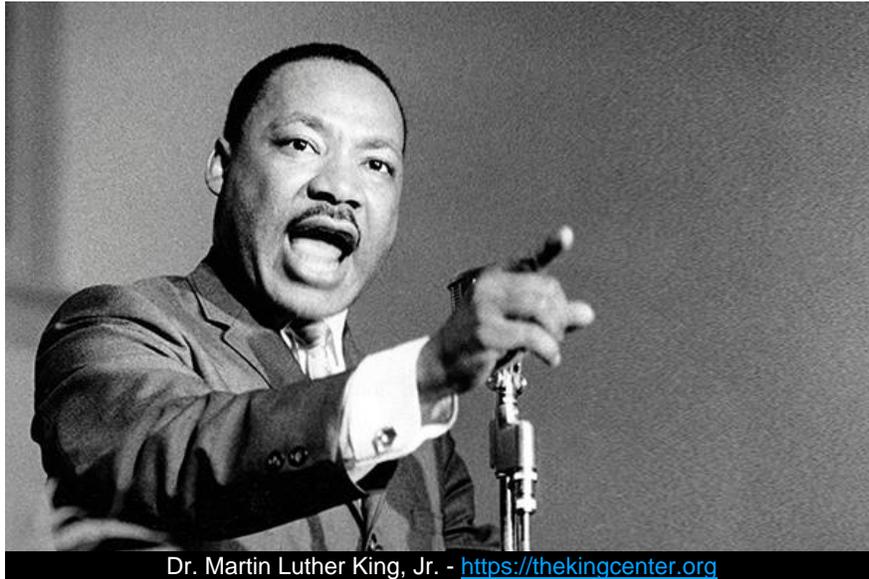
Are there any exciting production values we can look forward to?

I think that needs to stay a surprise!

The play is set in 1968. Are there aspects of this play, and of this particular production, that will resonate with our current state of the world?

We are at a crossroads and have been at a crossroads since long before 1968. Looking back at the past allows us to examine what has changed and what has stayed the same. This production asks us to look inside ourselves to figure out what we need to do in the short time we're on the planet - how to be more empathetic people, how to take action no matter how uncomfortable it may feel and what is necessary for us to create a better world for those who come after us.

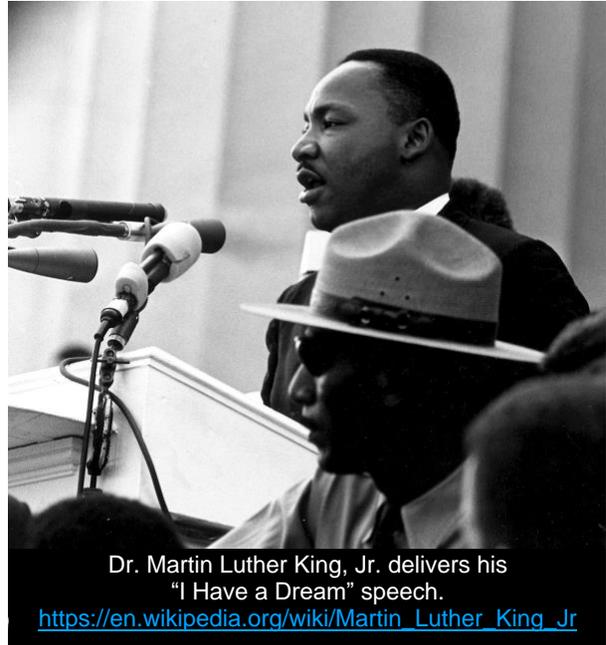
DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. - <https://thekingcenter.org>

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the American Civil Rights Movement from December, 1955 to April 4, 1968, preaching a philosophy of non-violent protest, grassroots organizing, and civil disobedience.
- Dr. King was born into a religious family. His grandfather and father were pastors of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. King drew on his faith for his principles and spoke frequently about his duty to God.
- Dr. King attended segregated public schools in Georgia, and then attended Morehouse College, an African-American institution in Atlanta, from which both his father and grandfather had graduated. Dr. King then studied theology for three years at the Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania where he was elected president of a predominantly white senior class. He then enrolled in graduate studies at Boston University, completing his residence for the doctorate in 1953. In Boston, he met and married Coretta Scott, a young woman studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. They would have two sons and two daughters.
- By 1954, Dr. King was a member of the executive committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. When the Montgomery bus boycott began in 1955, Dr. King became one of the leaders of the movement.
- The Montgomery bus boycott became one of the most successful non-violent demonstrations in modern history. During the boycott, King was arrested and his home was bombed, but he emerged as a great leader of the non-violent civil rights movement. The boycott lasted 382 days and ended with a Supreme Court decision declaring bus segregation unconstitutional.

- In 1957, Dr. King was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), formed to provide leadership for the growing civil rights movement. For the next eleven years, Dr. King travelled the country speaking over twenty-five hundred times, leading protests, and acting against injustice. He wrote "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," a manifesto for the civil rights movement, following his arrest during a protest in Birmingham; he told over 250,000 people "I Have a Dream" during a march in Washington, D.C.; and he led thousands in marches from Selma to Montgomery. At the age of thirty-five, Dr. King became the youngest person to win a Nobel Peace Prize. He gave the prize money to the Civil Rights Movement.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King_Jr

- On April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, to support a sanitation workers, Dr. King delivered the Speech, "*I have been to The Mountaintop*". The following day, April 4, 1968 he was assassinated.
- The news shook the nation. Dr. King remains a symbol of non-violence across the world and he is the only non-president to have a memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

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CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT TIMELINE

With the end of slavery in the United States came a new set of laws treating African-Americans as second-class citizens. For over ninety years, the “Jim Crow Laws” enforced racial segregation in education, housing, transportation, and public facilities.

The Civil Rights Movement struggled in the 1920s and 1930s. By the mid-1950s, the federal government began to support Civil Rights activists. In 1954, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” school facilities were unconstitutional, ordering integration in public schools. In the decade that followed, Civil Rights activists, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., fought a hard battle for equal rights. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the civil rights of all Americans were established by law.

1954 U.S. Supreme Court declares school segregation unconstitutional in **Brown v. Board of Education** ruling.



1955 Rosa Parks refuses to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, as required by city ordinance; the **Montgomery Bus Boycott** follows, and the bus segregation ordinance is eventually declared unconstitutional.

1957 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., helps found the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference** to work for full equality for African-Americans.

1957 The federal government uses the military to uphold African-Americans’ civil rights as soldiers escort nine black students to desegregate **Little Rock High School**.



1960 At the **Greensboro Sit-in**, four black college students refuse to move from the lunch counter of a Greensboro, NC, restaurant where black patrons are not served, launching sit-ins across the South.

1962 **Malcolm X** becomes the National Minister of the Nation of Islam. He rejects the non-violent Civil Rights Movement and preaches African-American separatism and securing equal rights through “any means necessary.”

1963 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivers his “**I Have a Dream**” speech to hundreds of thousands of supporters during the March on Washington, the largest Civil Rights march in history.



1963 Arrested for a protest in Birmingham, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., writes the “**Letter from a Birmingham Jail**” a manifesto for the Civil Rights Movement.

1964 Congress passes the **Civil Rights Act**, giving the federal government powers to prosecute discrimination based on race in employment, voting and education.



March from Selma to Montgomery

1965 A year after splitting with the Nation of Islam, **Malcom X is assassinated** in New York City.

1965 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., organizes a **march from Selma to Montgomery**, Alabama. Police beat and teargas protesters; the images are shown on television across the country.

1965 The **Voting Rights Act is passed**, outlawing the practices used to disenfranchise African-American voters.

1966 Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seales found the **Black Panther Party**, a radical black power group.



Voting Rights Act is passed

1967 **Thurgood Marshall** becomes the first African-American justice on the Supreme Court.

1968 **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is assassinated.** The event sparks riots across the country.

1968 **The Poor People's March on Washington**, a march against poverty planned by King before his death, goes on.

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HUMANIZING A HERO – ACTIVITY

Who was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Teachers: This activity can be done in person as follows:

Students stand in a line on one side of the classroom. After you read each statement, ask students to take a step forward if they believe it is true, or stay where they are if they think it is false. If they get it wrong, they take a step back. It will be interesting to get a visual look as to how much they know about MLK.

Digital Learning: Create a simple gesture for True and False that can be seen on the screen (example: truth - hands on head, false - arms crossed).

Read out the following statements

True or False

Statement 1

Martin Luther King was born Michael Luther King.

True: His birth name was Michael King Jr. born on January 15, 1929

Statement 2

Martin Luther King smoked cigarettes.

True: Dr. King was a regular smoker, although there are no pictures to back this up. He hid his habit from the public.

Statement 3

Martin Luther King went to college at the age of 10

False: He was 15. King was such a gifted student that he skipped grades nine and 12 before enrolling in 1944 at Morehouse College, the alma mater of his father and maternal grandfather.

Statement 4

Martin Luther King was a pastor.

True: At the age of 25 in 1954, King was called as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama

Statement 5

Martin Luther King Day is celebrated in the United States.

True: In 1983 President Ronald Reagan signed a bill that created a federal holiday to honour King. The holiday, first commemorated in 1986, is celebrated on the third Monday in January, close to the civil rights leader's January 15 birthday.

Statement 6

He had six kids.

False: He had four children: Martin Luther King III, Dexter King, Yolanda King and Bernice King with wife Coretta Scott King.

Statement 7

Martin Luther King went to jail.

True: He was imprisoned 29 times

Statement 8

At the age of 35, Martin Luther King, Jr., was the youngest man to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

True: His prize included a cheque for \$54,123, which he donated to various organizations – Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, National Council of Negro Women, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and others – to aid in the progress of the civil rights movement.

“I’VE BEEN TO THE MOUNTAINTOP.”

On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. gave what would be his last speech before his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, the following day. He addressed a sanitation workers strike.

His message – support for a strike among sanitation workers who were demanding better safety standards and wages – emphasized the need for the demonstration, the importance of nonviolent protest and the power of economic withdrawal.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *I’ve Been to the Mountaintop* (full transcript of *The Mountaintop* can be found: <https://speakola.com/ideas/martin-luther-king-jr-ive-been-to-the-mountaintop-1968>)

“It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it’s nonviolence or nonexistence.”

“Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation. And I want to thank God, once more, for allowing me to be here with you.”

“...the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around.”

“Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee – the cry is always the same: “We want to be free.”

“The issue is injustice.”

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!”

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!”

What is Dr. King’s state of mind as he delivers this speech?

For what is the mountain a metaphor for? What other literary devices can you identify in the speech?

Dr. King mentions God many times in this speech – what connection is there to his faith and the Civil Rights movement?

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE – LISTENING ACTIVITY

How can we compare Dr. King’s rhetoric style to other great speeches?

When someone uses language to effectively argue a point, or uses language to effectively impress an audience, it is called **rhetoric**

Teachers: Have students listen or read *The Mountaintop* and compare to Amanda Gorman’s *The Hill We Climb*

 **YouTube** Teachers: Hear the Speeches

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: I have been to The Mountaintop

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixfwGLxRJU8>

April 3, 1968

Amanda Gorman: The Hill We Climb

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wz4YuEvJ3y4>

January 21, 2021

Questions to lead discussion:

1. What poetic devices are being used?
2. What imagery is illustrated in the speeches?
3. What moments stand out?
4. Thinking about the key message from both speeches:
 - If you had the edit both speeches down to 10 lines, what would they be? Five lines? One line?
 - Be prepared to justify why you chose these lines.

PASSING THE BATON – WRITING ACTIVITY

What issues affect Black people in our world today? What issues affect young people in our world today? What issues affect YOU in our world today?

Using the same figures of speech as identified in the above exercise, create your own piece of writing that persuades an audience to believe your position. THEN, practice saying it employing the following vocal techniques:

- **Articulation** – How clearly you pronounce words and sounds.
- **Projection / Volume** – How loudly or quietly you speak.
- **Intonation** – Conveys the emotion of the character.
- **Pace** – Speed of dialogue, fast or slow
- **Pause** – Creating impact with silence/ heightening tension
- **Emphasis** – Stress given to a word to indicate importance

Present your unique, compelling speech and convey the message to your class.

SYMBOLISM OF COSTUME – ACTIVITY

What do costumes show us about class, systems, and race in *The Mountaintop*?

Costume designers create the look of each character by designing clothes and accessories the actors wear in performance.

The purpose of the costumes is not only to clothe the performer but to communicate their character to the audience and reflect the style, mood and setting of the production.

Using the internet and some of the links in the resource section of this guide, research what both characters might wear. Consider the historical context, colour and patterns to help fill in your design concept. Create your costume – you might want to sketch your ideas or find fabrics and attach to your design. When you watch the performance, look to see how the costume you created compares to the ones the actors wear. Any similarities? Any differences?

Costume Design Concept

	Camae	Dr. King
Time Period		
Place		
Genre		
Mood/Theme		



	Camae	Dr. King
Character/Style		
Texture/Fabric		
Pattern/Print		
Shape/Silhouette		
Colour Palette		

POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION

1. What are five adjectives you would use to describe Camae and Dr. King? Are there any adjectives that overlap?
2. Director, Audrey Dwyer said this line stood out: "Don't know where in the race we are, but pick up that baton and pass, pass, pass it along." Why does it stand out?
3. What props or set pieces played a symbolic role in the production?
4. What are your opinions on Camae and Martin Luther King's relationship? Did your view on their relationship change during the play? When?
5. Towards the end of the play, we see images and text of moments in history that affect the Civil Rights Movement – what else would you add to it?

VOCABULARY

Baton – an object passed off between team members in a relay race.

“I know I have dropped this baton so many times over this race.” – King

Bougie – derived from “bourgeois”; a derogatory term describing someone who aspires to be of higher class.

“Well, let me school you, you bougie Negro. I don’t need a PhD to give you some knowledge, understand?” – Camae

Catchin’ flies – behaving as though in a state of drunkenness.

“Cause these white folks here ‘bout to be catchin’ flies now the way they be acting wit’ Negroes these days.” – Camae

Diatribes – a bitter verbal attack or criticism

“Not too many maids spouting off well-formed diatribes like that.” – King

Incognegro – a derogatory term referring to an African-American who tries to hide their African heritage

“An incognegro. A spy.” – King

Injunction – a legal order commanding a person or group of persons to do or not do a particular action

“The city said it was seeking the injunction as a means of protecting Dr. King. . . .” – King

Larry Payne – a 16-year-old boy, shot by Memphis Police during the sanitation strike

“[Violence] just gives these police an excuse to shoot innocent folks. Like that boy . . . that 16-year-old boy they shot . . . Larry Payne. Larry Payne. Larry Payne. I’ll never forget his name.” – King

Malcolm X – an African-American Muslim minister, public speaker, and human rights activist; he was assassinated in February 1965

“I know God liked Malcolm X. And you woulda liked him, too. He didn’t drank. Smoke. Cuss.” – Camae

Martyr – a person who suffers or is killed while defending a principle, belief, cause, or idea

“You’ll be a man-made martyr. No, better yet! A saint!” – Camae

Oratorical – a characteristic of someone with eloquent and superior public speaking ability “Well...tell me... How are my ‘oratorical skills’—see y’en thank I knew them words?” – Camae

Panther – a reference to the Black Panther Party, an African-American revolutionary group active from 1966 until 1982

“So are you an honorary Panther?” – King

Preponderance – carrying superior weight, power, or importance

“We have gathered here today to deal with a serious issue. It is an issue of great preponderance” – Camae

Promised Land – in the Bible, the land promised by God to Abraham; also, a place or situation believed to hold ultimate happiness

“I have plans. Lots of plans in my head and in my heart and my people need me. They need me. I need to see them to the Promised Land.” – King

Poor People's Campaign – a campaign organized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to address the issues of economic justice and housing for America's poor

"The plan. It's all in the works. The Poor People's Campaign!" – King

Siddity – a term for someone who is pretentious or conceited

"You can call me siddity all you like, I want me a Pall Mall." – King

Spook – a term for a spy; also, a derogatory term for an African-American
"Well, you're not gonna catch me again! Where the hell is Ralph?/Ralph! I got a spook!" – King

Square – a term for a cigarette
"You ain't gone leave me here to work through the night wit nothin' to smoke on. ... All I got is one square left." – Camae

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CAST



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. - Ray Strachan



Camae - Cherissa Richards

CREATIVE TEAM

Director - Audrey Dwyer
Video Production - Frank Digital
Set Designer - Brian Perchaluk
Costume Designer - Rachel Forbes
Lighting & Video Designer - Hugh Conacher
Sound Designer - Chris Coyne
Dialect Coach - Amani Dorn
Fight Director - Jacqueline Loewen
Assistant Director - Hazel Venzon
Stage Manager - Leslie Watson
Assistant Stage Manager - Michael Duggan

WORKSHOPS

Watch *The Mountaintop* as a school group for \$75 and we'll include one workshop FREE!

Want to add the other workshop? Buy a second workshop for \$75 per class of 30 students.

Buy tickets and book your workshop at [\(link here\)](#).

WORKSHOP A

Martin Luther King's 1960s

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a regular everyday guy, right?

Explore the world of Martin Luther King, Jr. through hot seating and thought tracking to understand his point of view and his purpose within the Civil Rights Movement. This workshop is recommended for groups who are being introduced to this influential figure and the US civil rights movement.

Workshop availability:

One-hour, Wednesday afternoons from 1–4pm
Feb 16 – Mar 12

WORKSHOP B

Character Dynamics: Understanding Camae and MLK's relationship (scene study)

An exploration of symbolism, language, voice and dialogue

Join professional theatre artists as we delve into the world where Camae and Martin Luther King meet. What do we learn about these characters and their interaction, and what are their objectives in this scene? This practical exploration encourages students to discover more about this dynamic relationship.

Workshop availability:

One-hour, Thursday mornings from 9am–12pm
Feb 16 – Mar 12

Both workshops are practical in nature and will be held on Zoom

RESOURCES

<https://www.biography.com/activist/martin-luther-king-jr>

https://www.history.com/news/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-martin-luther-king-jr?li_source=LI&li_medium=m2m-rcw-biography

<https://thekingcenter.org/>

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/biographical/>

<https://civilrights.org/about/>

<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

<https://www.theamandagorman.com/>

<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/history/martin-luther-king-jr/>

Manitoba Curriculum

Diversity Education

Black History and Anti-racism in Canada

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/multic/bhm.html>

Social Studies

Grade 10

https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/overviews/grade10_american_hist.pdf

Grade 12

Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability

https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/global_issues/social.pdf

World Geography – a Human Perspective

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/overviews/senior4-worldgeo.pdf>

English Language Arts

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/ela/index.html>

Drama

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/arts/drama/index.html>