**USC**Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences

Department of English

**GESM 120 (35332): Century City: A Hundred Years of Los Angeles Stories**

**Humanistic Inquiry/Units: 4**

**Summer Session II 2017 (051: 6/28-8/8/17)**

**Tues/Wed/Thurs 1-3:50 VPD 107**

**Instructor: Dr. Chris Freeman**

**Office: Taper 410**

**Office Hours: 9-9:45 and by appointment**

**Contact Info: cefreema@usc.edu**

**Course Description**

“Century City” is a course intended to develop your critical thinking and writing skills as well as your discussion skills. To that end, you will be encouraged to keep a journal, write several formal papers, and actively participate in our daily discussions. You will also do a brief presentation during the semester on a topic directly related to LA history and culture. We will be exploring images of Los Angeles in various forms over the past hundred years. We’ll be reading fiction and nonfiction, and we will be watching several films to help us understand the many versions of Los Angeles (its history, culture, mythologies, terrain, etc.) at play in representations of our fair city. LA has a long and complex genealogy, and as USC student and LA resident, you should consider yourself in “lab” for this class 24/7.

**Learning Objectives**

“Century City” will help students understand the complex culture of their new home. You will read some important texts—fiction, nonfiction, poetry—and watch films and other videos to see how LA has changed over the past century; how it has exported images of itself; how it has melted down and rebuilt; how it has become a leading, global 21st century metropolis. Your writing skills will be challenged and honed in the essay assignments; your reading and discussion skills will expand in a seminar format; your speaking and communication skills will be polished in presentations and discussions; and your critical thinking skills will expand through involvement with our texts and how they fit into the narratives of LA and US history and culture. You will come out of the class with a more complex understanding of the social, historical, geographical, topographical, cultural, racial, political, and economic issues over the past century.

**The Contract**

In accepting this syllabus and becoming a member of this class, each student agrees to complete all assignments in a timely and serious fashion. You also affirm your commitment to the exploration of ideas in the liberal arts tradition, an exploration which is intellectual, creative, and respectful of others in the classroom. Your commitment to the quality and integrity of your work during the semester means that all work you hand in will be your own; *any outside sources will be properly cited*; and your work will be of the highest quality that you can produce. *Plagiarism will have severe ramifications, and I will spot-check anything suspicious to ensure against it*. If you have any questions about using outside sources, please ask me to help you.

As the instructor, my commitment to each student is that I have put considerable thought into developing this course; that I will work hard to invigorate and challenge you during the semester; that I will read your work carefully and with an open mind and will value it accordingly; that I will be prepared for class but that my agenda won’t get in the way of your input; and that I will be available to help you in your writing and thinking about the texts and issues we will be exploring.

**A Note on Conduct**

This is a professional classroom environment. We are here to work together; we are here to learn from one another and to explore our course material. Any behavior that is contrary to those goals will not be tolerated. No eating; no head-on-desk; no social media or other distractions. Don’t make me embarrass you by calling you out for unacceptable behavior.

**Readings and Supplementary Materials**

* John Fante, *Ask the Dust* (1939; Ecco, 1980)
* Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1947; Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002)
* D. J. Waldie, *Holy Land* (Norton, 1996, 2005)
* Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (1964; Minnesota, 2001)
* Joan Didion, *Play It As It Lays* (1970; FSG, 1990)
* Films include *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974); *Chris & Don: A Love Story* (Santi and Mascara, 2007); *Boyz ‘N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991); *Boys in Peril* (Streeter, 2012); *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015)

**Humanistic Inquiry Category**

“Century City: Los Angeles Stories” is an investigation into life in LA, from the story of an aspiring young Italian American writer, to the story of lost actress, to the story of a Black World War II shipyard worker, to the stories of three young Latino high school seniors in East LA trying to make their way into college. The struggle to make it in a place that seduces and disappoints is a human struggle. The course material explores how we learn what we need to know; how we balance ambition, dreaming, and hard work; how we handle disappointment and tragedy; how we explore the ethics of life in urban American, where radically different groups of people live in close proximity, sometimes with hostile, complex histories. The course includes discussions and readings about race and racism; about empathy and apathy; about dreams and nightmares; about Malibu and Compton. How the city has grown, how it positioned itself as a major destination; how art and commerce have shaped the city we live in. Through analysis and engagement with novels, poetry, song lyrics, videos, documentary, and historical texts, “Century City” provides students with a wide-ranging, diverse, and engaging curriculum, allowing them to imagine and understand the processes through with Los Angeles has emerged from an outpost of the Wild West to the vibrant, rich canvas that it is in the 21st century.

### **Grading**

* Essays One and Two 200 points each
* Research Project/Presentation (pairs) 300 points
* Take-Home Final Exam Essay (due last day) 200 points
* Class Participation 100 points\*

Essay one and two topics will be of your own invention, drawn from suggested topics from our readings and discussions. I’d suggest one “literary” topic and one “exploration/location” topic for the two main essays. The research project will team you up with a partner and will involve a 10-minute presentation and an essay (4-6 pp.) based on your presentation; your topic may be a book, a film, a person, or an institution significant in LA culture and history (see suggested list at the end of this syllabus).

NOTE: After your THIRD absence, you will forfeit all 100 class participation points

Grade scale: A: 930-1000; A-: 929-895; B+: 894-870; B: 869-830; B-: 829-795; C+: 794-770, etc.

**Schedule of Assignments**

**(subject to change as needed)**

**Part One: Young City: Pre-World War II LA—Desert and Water**

“Los Angeles, give me some of you!” (John Fante)

**Week One**

Wed (6/28): Introduction to the course; begin John Fante, *Ask the Dust*, including preface by Charles Bukowski and view half of *Chinatown*

Thurs (6/29): read Fante/clips from Robert Towne’s film of *Dust*; view the rest of *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974); Towne (Blackboard); noir discussion

**Week Two**

Wed (7/5): Finish Fante; discuss excerpts from Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Blackboard) and the foreword to *If He Hollers* by Hilton Als; discuss projects

**Part Two: World War II Era/Race and Place in LA/LA Noir**

“Driving in the middle of a foreign city, it hit him that he had arrived in Los Angeles without any assurance of anything.” (Isabel Wilkerson)

Thurs (7/6): Chester Himes, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*

Tues (7/11): Continue with Himes; discuss projects and essay one; Nina Simone/Langston Hughes video and handout; 7/8: last W day

**Weeks Three and Four**

Wed (7/12): finish Himes

Thurs (7/13): wrap up unit discussion; begin Waldie, *Holy Land*

Tues (7/18): **Group One project presentations** (part one: 1900-1960)Essay One due for non-group one people (4-6 pp.); begin Waldie,

**Weeks Four and Five: Post-War Boom Years/An Englishman in LA/Hollywood Kiss Off**

“To live sanely in Los Angeles, you have to

 cultivate the art of staying awake.” (Isherwood, “Los Angeles”)

Wed (7/19): Finish Waldie; begin Isherwood; discuss essay two;

Thurs (7/20): Group one project essays due (4-6 pp.); continue Isherwood; view *Chris & Don: A Love Story*

Tues (7/25): finish Isherwood; possible guest speakers

Wed (7/26): Begin Didion, *Play It As It Lays* (1970); interview from NBC/Brokaw; discuss essay two; essay one due from group one people

Thurs (7/27): continue Didion, including “Los Angeles Notebook” (Blackboard)

Tues (8/1): Finish Didion; begin screening *Boyz ‘n the Hood* (Singleton, 1991

**Weeks Six and Seven: Trouble in Paradise?: Contemporary LA**

Wed (8/2) finish and discuss *Boyz*; **Group two project presentations** (part two: since 1965); **LAST W DAY**

Thurs (8/3): ESSAY TWO DUE (5-7 pp.) for group one folks; final exam assigned; screening/discussion of *Straight Outta Compton* (2015)

Tues (8/8): MANDATORY DAY; Screening and discussion: *Boys in Peril* (Graham Streeter, 2012); possible guest speaker: Graham Streeter; **Group two project essays due;** wrap-up discussion; final exam due; all written work due by 5pm on 8/8 via email (cefreema@usc.edu)

**Project Topics**

**GROUP ONE (1930-65):**

1932 Olympics/Coliseum

Early/Classic Hollywood

Noir/Chandler

Zoot Suit Riots (1942)

Chavez Ravine/Dodger Stadium: Kyle and Ben

Reyner Banham/Greene and Greene/architecture/Schindler/Wright

The Hollywood Sign: Victor

**GROUP TWO (since 1965):**

Watts Towers/Watts Riots (1965): Jordan and Chuck

Disney/Disneyland: Bubba and Steve and Beth

Charles Manson

Laurel Canyon/music scene

Surfing/Beach Boys culture: Chris

David Hockney’s Art

Mayor Tom Bradley

Major Earthquakes

1984 Olympics: Chanel and TT

LA Lakers/LA Live/Magic Johnson/AIDS in Los Angeles: Isaiah and Levi

Skid Row: Joy and Kaelin

LA River project

Frank Gehry

**Academic Conduct**

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards*<https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

## **Support Systems**

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* <http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html>provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* [*http://emergency.usc.edu/*](http://emergency.usc.edu/)will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.