**USC**Dornsife

Department of English

**GESM 120 (35346): Crime & Punishment in Los Angeles (Category B: Humanistic Inquiry)**

**Units: 4/Spring 2020/ Tues/Thurs 11-12:20 VKC 200**

**Instructor: Dr. Chris Freeman (cefreema@usc.edu)**

**Office: Taper 410**

**Office Hours: T/Th 2-3:15 and by appt.**

**“No justice, no peace!”—Protester cries after Rodney King police acquittals, 1992**

**“Speak a little truth and people lose their minds.”—Ice T, in *Straight Outta Compton***



**Peter Alexander, “Thrasher” (1992)**

**Course Description**

Crime isn’t just a bad guy or a crook doing a bad thing to an innocent victim. Punishment isn’t just about prison time or retribution. Los Angeles is often thought of the city of dreams, a destination where both aspiring and desperate people come to make their lives better. Sometimes, it works out great; sometimes, it’s a nightmare. “Crime & Punishment in L.A.” will complicate both of the concepts in its title, both realities. We will think about L.A. on its own terms as well as in its place in American and even global history, politics, and culture.

As a General Education Seminar, this course is 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 discussions. You will also do a presentation during the semester on a topic directly related to L.A. history and culture. We will be exploring images of Los Angeles in various forms and media over the past eighty years. We’ll be reading fiction and nonfiction, and we will be watching several films (narrative and documentary) to help us understand the many versions of Los Angeles (its history, culture, mythologies, terrain, etc.) at play in representations of crime and punishment in our fair city. L.A. has a long and complex genealogy, and as USC student and LA resident, you should consider yourself in “lab” for this class 24/7.

**Category B: Humanistic Inquiry**

“Crime & Punishment in L.A.” is an investigaton of some of the most complex and challenging issues in the past, present, and future of Los Angeles. The course material explores what we might call the ethics of life in urban American, where radically different groups of people live in close proximity, sometimes with hostile, complex histories and always with significant socio-economic disparities. The course includes discussions and readings about race and racism; about empathy and apathy; about dreams and nightmares; about Brentwood and Compton. How the city has grown since World War II is a complex set of stories. How it is positioned as a major destination and as a microcosm of American culture will be of great concern for us. How art and commerce have shaped the city we live in, even as those discourses have caused conflict and controversy, will very much be our focus.

Through analysis and engagement with novels, poetry, song lyrics, videos, documentary, and historical texts, “Crime & Punishment in L.A.” 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, volatile canvas that it is in the 21st century.

**Learning Objectives**

Through our seminar’s conversations, our close analysis of texts, and your writing and consideration of the many issues we will confront in this course, you will develop a sophisticated, nuanced understanding of one of the largest, most vibrant, most diverse cities in the world. This is a city in which you’ll be a citizen for the next few years, and this course will help you cultivate skills that you can transfer to your other courses at USC and to your life as a thinking individual and a member of the various communities you inhabit and bump up against.

“Crime & Punishment in L.A.” will help you understand the complex culture of your new home. You will read some important texts—fiction, nonfiction, poetry—and watch films to see how L.A. has changed over the past century; how it has exported images of itself out to the world; how it has melted down and rebuilt at least twice in the past half century; and how it has become a leading global 21st century metropolis. Your writing skills will be challenged and honed in the essay assignments; your reading, listening, and discussion skills will expand in a seminar format; your speaking and communication skills will be polished in presentations and conversation; and your critical thinking skills will expand through interpretive involvement with our texts and through figuring out how they fit into the narratives of L.A. and US history and culture. You will also hone your collaborative skills, both in our open discussions and in small group work around your writing; and you will have the opportunity to work with a partner on a presentation relevant to the history and culture we are covering.

You should expect to 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. You will engage with questions of social justice and injustice; of the law and how it reflects and responds to historical realities; of popular culture and how “art is a reflection of our reality,” as Ice-T says in *Straight Outta Compton*, in a press conference after a violent confrontation with the Detroit police. We will read a variety of texts, from the 1940s up until the present, and you’ll be expected to engage outside of class as well by visiting local museums and/or attending events at the *Los Angeles Times* Festival of Books in mid-April. Such experiential learning prepares you for a future as an engaged citizen who understands and values history, literature, popular culture, and the arts.

**Readings and Supplementary Materials**

* Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Them Go* (1944; De Capo Books, 2002) ISBN: 978-1560254454
* John Buntin, *LA Noir* (Broadway Books, 2010) ISBN: 978-0307352088 (we will start with Himes and Buntin)
* Luis Rodriguez, *Always Running* (Atria Books, 2005) ISBN: 978-0743276917
* Dominick Dunne, *Another City Not My Own* (Ballantine/Random House, 1997) ISBN: 978-0345522191 (you’ll need to buy a used copy of this in hardcover or paperback; many for under $10 on Amazon, for example)
* Steph Cha, *Your House Will Pay* (Ecco/HarperCollins, 2019) ISBN: 978-0062868855 (this is a brand new novel that goes back and forth from the early 1990s to the present)
* Films include *L.A. Confidential* (Hanson, 1997); a Watts local news documentary; *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991); *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2016); and *Boys in Peril* (Streeter, 2012)
* On Blackboard, readings from *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles* (edited by Kevin R. McNamara, 2010); Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*; Joan Didion, “The White Album” (1979); *Twilight: Los Angeles* by Anna Deavere Smith; *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine; and more.

**TRIGGER WARNING: Given the volatility of the subject matter of the course and the life and death circumstances that our work will often confront, please be aware that some of what we read, view, and discuss will be difficult, emotionally and otherwise, to handle, for all of us. Let’s be sensitive to that in our seminar—we will always be respectful; we will always assume best intentions and best efforts at civil discourse. If something you are reading or viewing is too upsetting, SKIP IT and talk to me about alternatives and other strategies.**

### **Grading/assignments**

* Diagnostic essay (2-3 pp., due week three) 100 points
* Essay 1 (4-6 pp., due week seven) 250 points
* Research Presentation/Essay 2 (15 mins/5-7 pp.)\* 300 points
* Take Home Final Exam/Essay 3 (5-7 pp. by 5/12 noon)\* 250 points
* Class Participation 100 points\*

\*NOTES: After your THIRD absence, you will forfeit 100 class participation points; project presentations may be in solo or in pairs. You are aiming toward a 10- to 15-minute presentation and a supplementary/companion essay. The essay is due on a rolling basis, in class on the Thursday of the week after you present. Your final exam will be in two parts; one of your exam essays will be based on a museum visit or on the LA Times Festival of Books. For your planning purposes, we will not meet on May 12th; you will submit your final exam via email.

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)**

**Part One: Growing Pains in 1940s and 50s Los Angeles**

**Week One** (1/14 and 16)

T: Introductions; Syllabus; overview of L.A. history/culture; discuss texts and expectations/assignments

TH: Timeline and McNamara intro from *Cambridge Guide to the Literature of Los Angeles* (Blackboard); begin reading Himes, 1-68 and Hilton Als, preface; Diagnostic essay assigned (due 1/28; 2-3 pp.); choose projects and set up meetings with first groups

**Week Two** (1/21 and 23)

T: Continue Himes, 69-111; excerpts from Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*

TH: Continue Himes; visit California African American History Museum if possible this weekend; *LA Noir*, 1-42

**Week Three**  (1/28 and 30)

T: Diagnostic essay due at class; finish Himes; poetry and lyrics related to Himes; “LA and the African-American Literary Imagination” by Charles Scruggs (*Cambridge Guide to the Literature of Los Angeles*)

TH: *LA Noir*, 43-120; first presentations: Zoot Suit Riots; Sleepy Lagoon case; wrap up Part One

**Part Two: Mid-Century “Maturing” in the 1950s to the 1970s**

**Week Four** (2/4 and 2/6)

T: *LA Noir*, 123-226

Th: continue to discuss *LA Noir*; presentations: Chavez Ravine; Dodger Stadium

**Week Five** (2/11 and 13)

T: film: *LA Confidential* (Hanson, 1997); *LA Times* essays on noir (Blackboard)

TH: finish and discuss the film; discuss essay one prompts

**Week Six** (2/18 and 20)

T: *LA Noir*, 229-72; presentation on film noir and crime/detective genre films from Classic Hollywood; read “City of Sleuths” by William Marking from *Cambridge Guide*

TH: *LA Noir,* 273-323 (end); Watts local news documentary (YouTube); discuss essay one progress

**Week Seven** (2/25 and 27)

T: Presentation: Watts Towers; Watts Riots; Kerner Report and aftermath; bring in draft of essay one for peer workshop; on Blackboard, read “Post-War LA: Suburban Eden and the Fall into History” by Patrick O’Donnell (*Cambridge Guide*)

TH: **Essay one due at class (4-6 pp.)**

**Week Eight** (3/3 and 3/5)

T: Rorty/Bradley mayoral race 1969 (YouTube); Joan Didion, “The White Album” on Blackboard

Th: presentation: Manson Family/murders/trials and aftermath; wrap up discussion of Part Two

**Part Three: 1980s and 90s—Turbulent Los Angeles**

**Week Nine** (3/10 and 12)

T: *Always Running* (1-70); watch trailer for *Do The Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989); watch first half of *Boyz ‘N the Hood*

TH: *Always Running* (71-110); finish and discuss *Boyz*; presentation: Bloods and Crips and gangs in LA

SPRING BREAK; finish *Always Running* and watch *Straight Outta Compton*

**Week Ten** (3/24 and 26)

T: watch clips from *Straight Outta Compton* and discuss; watch opening of *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992); King beating; presentation: LaTasha Harlins killing; 1992 uprising; read first parts of Cha, *Your House Will Pay* (1-125)

Th: continue with Cha up to 125; presentations: Harlins/King/aftermath; read excerpts of *Twilight: Los Angeles* on Blackboard; *Citizen* (Claudia Rankine) excerpts

**Week Eleven** (3/31 and 4/2)

T: O. J. Simpson documentary; Dominck Dunne, *Another City Not My Own* (ch 1-7)

TH: finish Simpson documentary; Dunne (ch 8-15)

**Week Twelve** (4/7 and 4/9)

T: Dunne (ch 16-22)

Th: finish Dunne and wrap Part Three

**Part Four: 21st Century LA: Past Sins/Present Tense/Future Challenges**

**Week Thirteen** (4/14 and 16)

T: resume reading Cha, *Your House* (125-86)

Th: continue in Cha (187-245); presentation: Homelessness in LA/Skid Row

**Week Fourteen** (4/21 and 23)

T: continue in Cha (255-end); discuss *L.A. Times* Festival of Books schedule (4/18-19, on campus); B’board, “Essaying Los Angeles” by Eric Avila (*Cambridge Guide*)

Th: wrap up Cha; begin *Boys in Peril* (Streeter) documentary

**Week Fifteen** (4/28 and 30 )

T: Project: DACA and Immigration in Los Angeles; finish *Boys in Peril*

Th: wrap up Part Four and the whole course; discuss the final exam essays; online course evaluations; all written work, other than the final exam, due at class

**Take Home Final Exam/Essays (5-7 pp.) due before noon on 5/12 pm via email, attachment in WORD (lastnamefinal.doc or .docx)**

**Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

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 Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. 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.

Support Systems: Student Counseling Services (SCS) – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call: Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255: Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call: Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp

Sexual Assault Resource Center: For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website:sarc.usc.edu

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086 Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. equity.usc.edu

Bias Assessment Response and Support: Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response.studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support

The Office of Disability Services and Programs Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. dsp.usc.edu

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710: Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic.studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa

Diversity at USC: Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. diversity.usc.edu

USC Emergency Information: Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. emergency.usc.edu

USC Department of Public Safety – UPC: (213) 740-4321 – HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24-hour emergency or to report a crime. Provides overall safety to USC community. dps.usc.edu

**Definition of Excellence in Teaching**

**USC Department of English**

All writing is creative, and all civic engagement requires a sophisticated understanding of discourse and interpretation. The USC Department of English is committed to the power of the story, the word, and the image. We analyze and organize complex ideas, evaluate qualitative information, anticipate how real audiences respond to language, and study behaviors of complex characters leading uncertain lives with competing values. We develop critical abilities for a successful life, but our stories tell us why life is worth living.

Excellence in teaching is an active engagement with these commitments, perspectives, and values. A student with a major in **English** should graduate with an appreciation for (1) the relations between representation and the human soul, and (2) the relations between words and ideas. Teachers will encourage this appreciation through their knowledge and conveyance of the subject, the appropriateness of instructional materials, and the quality of their students’ responses. We expect our students to:

* understand the major representations in English discourse from earliest beginnings to the current moment; all literatures exist in conversation with earlier literatures;
* organize and interpret evidence;
* feel the experiences of others, both by engaging in literatures and by their own efforts to create new literatures;
* understand how periods, cultural intentions, and literary genres differ;
* grasp the skills and theories of interpretation, and the history of our own discipline;
* see how interpretive interests shift with time and place;
* attend to linguistic details of semantics, phrasing, and structure;
* assume there are reasonable alternative understandings of a text;
* adjudicate differences through reasoned arguments that honestly engage counter-arguments.

Our students will have lives in very different arenas, but all calling for skills in discourse, empathy, civil argument, and civic engagement. We cannot and should not say what those careers will be; we train students for jobs that have not yet been invented.

English Department students with an interdisciplinary major in **Narrative Studies** should expect instruction that inculcates an appreciation for all of the above, and coordinates with definitions of teaching excellence in USC’s corresponding departments.

The Department of English adheres to the modalities of instruction published in the “USC Definition of Excellence in Teaching.”

Approved September 18, 2018

Undergraduate Studies Committee

Department of English