AMST 205: Introduction to American Popular Culture

Spring 2021 | Monday & Wednesday, 12:00 PM–1:50 PM

Professor Jonathan Leal, PhD

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 12 PM–1:30 PM Pacific, and by appointment if necessary.

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Office Hours: Wednesdays, 4 PM–5 PM Pacific

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Course Description

It's no secret that the stuff and feeling of popular culture surround us—the music we love, the food we eat, the stories we remember, the tacit associations we generate, the devices we carry in our pockets almost everywhere. At virtually all moments, such popular cultural objects, processes, and narratives actively shape the ways we interact with one another, the ways we view ourselves, the ways we speak with loved ones, the ways we understand how societies function. So it's vital, as we move through our worlds, digital and physical, that we have some tools for understanding how all of that stuff and feeling—from diss tracks to mockumentaries, game-winning shots to fail memes, big-budget spectacles to DIY ventures—inform the ways we live, relate, even dream.

This course thus provides an opportunity for students to develop new popular cultural and media literacies, as well as new vocabularies for analysis, engagement, even transformation. As an introductory survey, one of our central goals will be engaging with a wide variety of popular cultural products and platforms—from Netflix's *The Last Dance* and TikTok's meme cycles to awards-show theatrics and Super Bowl halftime shows—through critical concepts in American Studies including media, power, history, representation, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, difference, capitalism, technology, intersectionality, and entertainment. In writing and conversation, students will attend to the complexities of different cultural producers, consumers, publics, narratives, and popular products, asking how and why different objects and processes work, and for whom.

Learning Objectives

Through this course, students will learn to:

- Recognize and historicize the social functions of everyday pop cultural products
- Connect personal experiences of popular cultures in the United States to broader histories and populations
- Understand the importance of gender, sexuality, class, race, nation, neoliberalism, power, representation, media, and genre in their everyday lives
- Form evidence-based interpretations of contemporary cultural objects and processes

- Conduct research on popular culture utilizing a variety of analytical methodologies, including close reading, close listening, interviewing, and audiovisual analysis
- Develop an understanding of the cultural industry infrastructures that help construct notions of the popular
- Differentiate between residual, dominant, and emergent cultural narratives
- Acquire skills for engaging popular culture across a variety of media forms

Required Materials and Subscriptions

Course Readings: Available on Blackboard / Online.

Netflix Account: Please feel free to share with one another (and/or have virtual watch parties).

Spotify Account: The free version will be just fine.

Assignment Structure

Through a series of short assignments distributed evenly throughout the semester, students will develop a cumulative, intergenerational, popular culture research project that not only documents students' engagements with this course's themes, arguments, and readings, but also encourages meaningful conversations with an older friend or family member about a piece of popular culture—a song, a film, even a video game—that they felt attached to as a teenager. What drew this older friend or relative to this particular album, this specific movie, this one concert? When and how did they experience this pop cultural work? Did they enjoy repeat viewings and listenings? Did they experience this work as a single, memorable event? What feelings and memories are still stored in this piece of popular culture? And how does this older friend or relative feel about this work now?

This cumulative research project has been designed as an opportunity for students to learn, practice, and connect a variety of different research skills important to the study of popular culture today, including interviewing, historicization, comparison, formal analysis, and theorization. It's also been designed to help combat the feelings of social isolation that have become increasingly common amid the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic; there's no way for a student to complete this course's assignment sequence without connecting with an older person they care about—nor without learning, from that person's recollections, something about the personal and communal histories ever-present in song, film, food, books, and more.

Detailed assignment sheets will be provided to students as the course proceeds.

Assignment Submission and Grading

Assignments will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- On-time submission of materials throughout the semester on designated dates. (Late submissions will be penalized 5 points per day late, as a broader aim of this project is to construct a cumulative assignment portfolio over a substantial period of time.)
- An engagement with each assignment's primary questions, as listed on the assignment sheets.

Assignment 1: Survey: Introductory Questionnaire (12%)

Assignment 2: Concepts: Defining Popular Culture (12%)

Assignment 3: Skills: Interviewing Practice Exercise (12%)

Assignment 4: Outreach: Intergenerational Interview, Pt. 1 (Brief Written Reflection on the Experience) (12%)

Assignment 5: Documentation: Intergenerational Interview, Pt. 2 (Annotated, Abridged Transcription) (12%)

Assignment 6: Analysis: Engagement with the Primary Object (Including connections with at least one course reading) (12%)

Assignment 7: Contextualization: Historicization of the Primary Object (Including connections with at least one course reading) (12%)

Assignment 8: Reflection: Complete Portfolio with Final Reflection (16%)

All deadlines are 10 PM Pacific Standard Time.

Zoom Procedures

This course will meet over Zoom at its normally scheduled time. When possible (and, importantly, only if students feel comfortable doing so), I recommend students enable cameras during class sessions to facilitate a communal atmosphere. (This isn't a requirement in this class, however.)

By default, all students will remain muted during our normal sessions. If you'd like to ask a question or make a comment, please use Zoom's "Raise Hand" function to form a queue.

Note: our synchronous class sessions will automatically be recorded and uploaded to Blackboard after our meetings for student reference. It's important to remember that these videos are for enrolled students only; distribution or use of notes or recordings based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study violates the USC Student Conduct Code.

Attendance

Due to the participatory nature of the course (and the cumulative structure of the assignments), it's necessary that students attend all lectures *and* section meetings. Three or more unexcused absences (lecture or section) will result in a grade penalty; seven unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the course.

If you anticipate needing to miss class for a medical reason, religious holiday, or university function—or if you experience a different type of excusable emergency that prevents you from attending class—I ask that you communicate with me and Quinn *as early as possible* so we have everything on file.

Additionally, if you need to access the course asynchronously (due to timezone differences), you'll need to reach out to Quinn and me as early as possible in the semester to let us know your situation; this will allow us to set up an alternative process for attendance taking.

Tardies

Students arriving more than 20 minutes late—or leaving more than 20 minutes early—may be marked as absent. It's important that you arrive on time, and that you communicate proactively if something comes up; if you arrive late, it'll be your responsibility to check in with me and Quinn*the day of* so we have you marked present.

USC Technology Support Links

Zoom information for students

Blackboard help for students

Course Schedule

Note: open to slight adjustments as the course progresses.

Week 1: Popular Culture: Concepts

1/18: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (No Class)

1/20:

- Brandt and Clare, "Introduction to Popular Culture in the U.S." (2018)
- [Chayka, "Can the Monoculture Survive the Algorithm? And Should It?" (2019)](#)
- Williams, "Residual, Dominant, and Emergent" (1976)
- *Optional: Williams, "Culture" and "Masses," (1976)*

- **Assignment One Due on Friday, January 22 at 10 PM (Pacific): Introductory Questionnaire**

Week 2: American Dreaming

1/25:

- Brandt and Clare, "Cultural Myths and the American Dream" (2018)
- Duggan, "Neoliberalism" (2014)
- WATCH: "Nosedive," *Black Mirror* (2016) (Netflix)

1/27:

- Brandt and Clare, "Material Culture" (2018)
- WATCH: Episode 5, *The Last Dance* (2020) (Netflix)

- **Assignment Two Due on Friday, January 29 at 10 PM (Pacific): Defining Popular Culture**

Week 3: Extremely Online

2/1:

- [Tolentino, "The I in Internet" (2019)](#)

2/3:

- Tolentino, "The Age of Instagram Face" (2019)

- Brandt and Clare, "Heroes and Celebrities" (2018)

- *Optional: McMillan Cottom, "Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet: The Sociology of Race and Racism in the Digital Society" (2020)*

Week 4: The Work of Representation

2/8:

- Henderson, "Representation" (2017)
- WATCH: Hall, "Representation and Media" (1997)

2/10:

- Brandt and Clare, "Social Constructions of Identity" (2018)
- Villarreal, "Selena, Dehistoricized" (2020)
- Zaragoza, "The Never-Ending Exploitation of Selena Quintanilla" (2020)
- WATCH / LISTEN: Selena, "La Llamada" (1993) "Selena and Me," *Anything for Selena* (2021) (Podcast).

- **Assignment 3 has due dates specific to each discussion section.**
    - **Wednesday Discussion Section: Assignment 3 is Due on Wednesday, February 10 at 10 PM (Pacific).**
    - **Friday Discussion Section: Assignment 3 is Due on Friday, February 12 at 10 PM (Pacific).**
    - **(We'll be in touch with asynchronous participants with more instructions.)**

Week 5: Race and Speculative Fiction

2/15: President's Day (No Class)

2/17:

- Martinez HoSang and Labennett, "Racialization" (2014)
- Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" (1993)
- LISTEN: carrington, "On Race and Science Fiction" (2016)
- WATCH: *Black Panther* (2018) (Disney)
- **Interviewee Consent Forms Due by Friday, February 19 at 10 PM (Pacific)**

Week 6: On Américan Song

2/22:

- Kun, "Strangers Among Sounds" (2005)
- Gruesz, "America" (2014)
- LISTEN: Simon & Garfunkel, "America" (1965), David Bowie, "Young Americans" (1975), James Brown, "Living in America" (1985), Prince "America" (1985), Los Tigres del Norte, "Mis dos patrias" (1997), Rufus Wainright "Going to A Town" (2007), Childish Gambino, "This is America" (2018), Lana Del Rey "Looking for America" (2019)

2/24:

- Young, *The Grey Album* (Excerpts) (2012)
- **Benchmark Date: Conduct Intergenenerational Interview by Wednesday, February 24**

- **Assignment Four Due on Friday, February 26 at 10 PM (Pacific): Intergenerational Interview (Brief Written Reflection on the Experience)**

Week 7: Undergrounds

3/1:

- Hebdige, "Subcultures" (1979)
- Abdurraqib, "I Wasn't Brought Here, I Was Born: Surviving Punk Rock Long Enough to Find Afropunk," and "The Return of the Loneliest Boys In Town" (2017)

3/3:

- Boshier, "'We Paid for This Town': The Legacy of Chicanx Punk in LA" (2020)
- WATCH: *As I Walk Through the Valley* (2018)
- Special Guest: Latinx Media Producer Charlie Vela, Co-Director of *As I Walk Through the Valley* (2018)

Week 8: On (New) Media, Storytelling, and Narrative Participation

3/8:

- Mohammed, "Mastering Effects: Podcasts and the Authoritarian Voice" (2019)
- LISTEN: "Cars," *This American Life* (2013)

3/10:

- Lotz, "Television Outside the Box: The Technological Revolution of Television" (2007)
- Chaney, "*Kimmy Schmidt vs. the Reverend* is What Interactive TV Was Made For" (2020)
- WATCH: *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. The Reverend* (2020) (Netflix)

- **Assignment Five Due on Friday, March 12 at 10 PM (Pacific): Intergenerational Interview (Written Interview Transcription)**

Week 9: Music Video, Platforms, and Fandom

3/15:

- Vernallis, "Telling and Not Telling" (2004)
- WATCH: HAIM, "I Know Alone" (2020); Billie Eilish, "My Future" (2020); Thao and the Get Down Stay Down, "Phenom" (2020); Beyoncé, "Formation" (2016)
- WATCH: Joseph Kahn on Music Videos

3/17:

- Joon Lee and Young Jin, "Emergence of K-Pop as Transnational Popular Culture" (2019)
- Lee, "How 'Gangnam Style' Saved My Life" (2019)
- Coscarelli, "Why Obsessive K-Pop Fans Are Turning Toward Political Activism" (2020)
- WATCH: Tajiboys, "I Know" (1992), Psy "GANGNAM STYLE (강남스타일)" (2012); BTS "On (At Grand Central Terminal)" (2020); Lim Kim, "Yellow" (2019)

Week 10: On Sport, Politics, and Spectacle

3/22:

- Real and Wenner, "Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle Revisited" (2017)
- Brooks, "How #BlackLivesMatter Started a Musical Revolution" (2016)
- Abdurraqib, "The Night Prince Walked On Water" (2017)
- WATCH: Beyoncé Super Bowl Halftime Performance (2016); Prince Super Bowl Halftime Performance (2007); Madonna Super Bowl Halftime Performance (2012); "*Billboard* Explains the Super Bowl Halftime Show" (2021)

3/24:

- Fernández, "The Emotional Legacy of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*" (2020)
- Thorpe and Wheaton, "The X Games: Re-Imagining Youth and Sport" (2017)
- *Optional: Neftalie Williams, Interview in Jenkem Magazine (2017)*

- **Assignment Six Due on Friday, March 26 at 10 PM (Pacific): Engagement with the Primary Popular Cultural Object**

Week 11: Culture Beyond Binaries

3/29:

- Halberstam, "Gender" (2014)
- Martinez HoSang, "Intersectionality" (2020)

- WATCH: *Play Your Gender* (2016) (iTunes)

3/31:

- Geffen, "An Alternate Ribbon of Time," "Not a Woman, Not a Man: Prince's Sapphic Androgyny," "No Shape: The Formless Internet," and "Whole New World" from *Glitter Up the Dark* (2020)
- WATCH / LISTEN: Prince, "I Would Die 4 U" (1984); Prince & The Revolution, "Kiss" (1986); Sophie, "Faceshopping" (2019)

Week 12: Buscando América

4/5:

- Aguilar, "Love in the Stars: *Mucho Mucho Amor* Filmmakers on Gender Trailblazing Astrologer Walter Mercado" (2020)

- Alcántara, "How Walter Mercado Inspired a Generation of Young People to be True to their Beliefs and Identity" (2019)
- Aldama, "Latinx Pop Culture Hoy!" (2020)
- WATCH: *Mucho Mucho Amor: The Legend of Walter Mercado* (2020) (Netflix)

4/7: Wellness Day (No Class)

- **Assignment Seven on Friday, April 9 at 10 PM (Pacific): Historicization of the Primary Popular Cultural Object**

Week 13: On Criticism

4/12:

- Tongson, "A Take on Takes on Takes, or the Function of Criticism in the Present Time" (2020)
- Petrusich, "MTV News and the Threats to Negative Criticism" (2017)
- Hsu, "Notes from the Margin"
- *Optional: Lorentzen, "Like This or Die" (2019)*

4/14:

- del Valle Schorske, "The World According to Bad Bunny" (2020)
- Sloan and Harding, "The Culture Warped Pop, For Good" (2021)
- LISTEN: Bad Bunny, *El último tour del mundo* (2020)

Week 14: Closeness, Distance

4/19:

- Guest Lecture: Quinn Anex-Ries
  - Closs, "I Want My Gay TV" (1999)
  - McKinney, "Newsletter Networks" (2015)

4/21:

- Lipsitz, "Popular Culture: This Ain't No Sideshow" (1990)

Week 15: The 2020s

4/26:

- WATCH: *Worn Stories* (Episode 2: "Lost and Found") (2021) (Netflix)
- LISTEN: Flying Lotus, "Black Gold" and "Between Memories" (from *Yasuke*, to be released on Netflix April 29, 2021)

- Optional Listen: *reply-all*, ["The Case of the Missing Hit"](#) (2020)

4/28:

- WATCH: [Lil Nas X, "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)" (2021)](#)
- Optional Watch: [Lil Nas X, "Montero (Call Me By Your Name) (But Lil Nas X Makes All The Sounds with His Mouth)" (2021)](#); [Lil Nas X, "Montero (Call Me By Your Name) (Official Video Except it's Not the Official Video at All)" (2021)](#); [FKA twigs, "Cellophane" (2019)](#)

Final:

Assignment Eight Due on Friday, May 7 at 10 PM (Pacific): Final Reflection and Complete Cumulative Portfolio

Note on Language and Wellness

Racist, sexist, homophobic, and other forms of derogatory language will not be tolerated in this course, whether in groups discussions or writing assignments. If you have questions or concerns about this, please schedule an office hours appointment so we can discuss them.

Likewise, if you have any wellness-related concerns about any of the assigned course materials—not all media affect all viewers in the same ways—please reach out to me so we can have a conversation and, if need be, find alternative ways forward.

Statement for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered as early in the semester as possible. Contact information: (213) 740-0776 (phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (fax), ability@usc.edu.

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, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](#).

Support Systems:

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press "0" after hours – 24/7 on call

studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) - (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298

equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776

dsp.usc.edu

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test-taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 821-4710

campussupport.usc.edu

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101

diversity.usc.edu

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu

Non-emergency assistance or information.