

GESM 120: Los Angeles Stories (35330)
Humanistic Inquiry (B)/Units: 4
Summer Session II 2021 (051—6/30-8/10)
Tue/Wed/Thurs 10am-12:50 pm PT
via Zoom

Instructor: Dr. Chris Freeman
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Office Hours: by appt.
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Course Description

“Los Angeles Stories” is a course intended to develop your critical thinking and writing skills as well as your discussion skills. We will be exploring images of Los Angeles in various forms over the past 80 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 we will cover as many aspects of its past and present as we can. You will write several formal papers, and you will actively participate in our daily discussions. You will also do a brief presentation (with a partner) during the semester on a topic related to LA history and culture.

Humanistic Inquiry Category

“Los Angeles Stories” is an investigation into life in LA, from the story of a young 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, “Los Angeles Stories” provides students with a wide-ranging, diverse, and engaging curriculum, allowing them to imagine and understand the processes through which Los Angeles has emerged from an outpost of the Wild West to the vibrant, rich canvas that it is in the 21st century.

Learning Goals

This course will help you understand the complex culture of your 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/conversation format; your speaking and communication skills will be polished in presentations and in-class 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 write two essays (1200-1500 words each) with prompts drawn from our readings/viewings in which you analyze your topic relationship to LA history and culture and situate it into your understanding of how LA has changed in the past; this will likely involve linking LA history to US history;
- You will work with a partner to collaborate on a presentation and essay on a significant topic from this history (for example, the 1984 Olympic Games) to demonstrate how your topic figures in to the history of the city; how it relates to the issues our course is concerned with; you will select and describe these elements of your topic. You will design a concise, clear PowerPoint/Prezi (15-20 minutes long) and present that to the group, and you will write a research-based essay (1200-1500 words) on a salient aspect of your topic, to be turned in one week from your presentation date;
- To facilitate our daily seminar discussions, you will respond to discussion board prompts on Blackboard twice during the term (the class will be divided into two response groups); those comments will identify important passages/scenes/characters and will offer analysis of their significance; each student

will participate in the seminar discussion using their comment as a launching point to demonstrate careful engagement with the texts and to begin a critique process.

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. In class, you will engage with the material, pay attention, to make comments and ask questions, to listen to your classmates, and to learn. This is a basic requirement for you to receive credit for participating in the class; merely showing up isn't sufficient. 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 is representing someone else's work as your own. It 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. I'm here to help you succeed, to adjust to life at USC, and to help you strengthen your reading, writing, and discussion skills.

CONTENT 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. Our first book, for example, makes frequent use of the N word; we WILL NOT use that word in our discussions or our writing. 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.

If you have to miss class, you should watch the recording; you will need to email me a brief response/reaction before 8am PT the following day.

ATTENDANCE VIA ZOOM: Here are some guidelines to keep in mind so that our course goes smoothly; that everyone participates; that we are courteous and respectful to one another. Please be in touch with me ASAP and privately if there are any problems or issues that I need to be aware of to help the course work

better for you. ALSO, LET ME KNOW IF YOU WILL NOT BE ATTENDING CLASS LIVE AT OUR APPOINTED TIME. If you watch a recording, you need to email me a brief response/reaction before 8am PT the following day.

- it's important to keep a level of professionalism
- please don't be in bed for class
- please come into our Zoom room on time
- remember that you're on camera and often on hot mic, so look and sound the part
- please be courteous (no eating during class, don't take us on your bathroom break, etc). We will take breaks during our meetings, as needed.
- keep your camera on as much as possible during our class time; your microphone should be muted except when you're talking
- use the 'raise hand' function as needed to participate in the conversation

Readings and Supplementary Materials (USC Trojan Bookstore or however you wish to acquire the material)

- Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945; Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002): PDF on Blackboard
- D. J. Waldie, *Holy Land* (Norton, 1996, 2005): available from Amazon on free Kindle app for \$10
- Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (FSG or Minnesota; 1964; 2001): available on Amazon for free Kindle app for \$3
- Joan Didion, *Play it as it Lays* (1970): Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2nd edition (November 1, 2005) Paperback: 240 pages; ISBN-10: 0374529949; ISBN-13 : 978-0374529949 (Kindle also available)
- Steph Cha, *Your House Will Pay* (Ecco, 2019): available on free Kindle app for \$13
- Films will likely include *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974); *Boyz 'N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991); *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015); *Bridging the Divide: Mayor Tom Bradley* (Goldfarb, 2015); *Jewel's Catch One* (C. Fitz, 2016); *Boys in Peril* (Streeter, 2012); *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (Q. Tarantino, 2019); for films not accessible to you, alternate assignments using KCET.org and their "Lost LA" archive will suffice.

Grading

- Short "introduce yourself" essay (750 words) 50 points
- Essays One and Two (1200-1500 words) 200 points x2
- Research Project/Presentation/paper (pairs) 300 points
- Take-Home Final Exam Essay (due last day, 8/10) 150 points

- Class Participation/engagement/professionalism 100 points*

Essay one and two topics will be of your own invention, drawn from suggested topics/prompts 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 15-20 minute presentation and an essay (4-6 pp.) based on your presentation; you have about 12 topics to choose from with rolling deadlines. We will have two-on-one conferences to set up and help you and your partner develop these presentations.

*NOTE: After your THIRD absence, you will forfeit all 100 class participation points; the last day, Tuesday, 8/6 is MANDATORY. If you miss class, watch the Zoom video and email me your notes. **Class participation includes showing up on time, paying attention, contributing to the conversation, and professional demeanor. See note about Zoom, above.**

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; the schedule is in weekly units; synchronous work is that which we do together in our Zoom sessions; asynchronous is your 'homework' which you and sometimes a partner or small group will do between class meetings and over weekends.)

Part One: World War II Era/Race and Place: 1940s & 50s LA

"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)

Wed (6/30): Introduction to the course; Old and new LA; LA myths and truths; "Live and Learn" essay from the *New Yorker* by Louis Menand on the purpose of college education (Blackboard); begin Himes (ch 1 and 2); "The Californians" from SNL (clips)

Discuss self-introduction essay, due 7/5 noon PT via Turnitin

Thurs (7/1): continue Himes; discuss projects

Asynchronous: *Chinatown* (Hulu/Starz); *13th* (Netflix); *The Butler* (Amazon Prime); *Selma* (free on Open Culture website); *What Happened, Miss Simone* (Netflix); *Green Book* (Hulu; Showtime); *Crash* (Amazon Prime; Hulu/HBO)— **watch one of those options and comment on discussion board before class on Thursday, 7/8, connecting it to the era and the issues of Himes**

Tues (7/6): continue Himes up to Chapter 12; poems and videos on Black life in USA in 1940s and 50s (Blackboard); Wilkerson, "Warmth of Other Suns" excerpts from Blackboard; discuss excerpts from Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Blackboard); make choices for projects; schedule meetings to discuss projects and essay one; look at CAAM museum website

Wed (7/7): continue Himes up to chapter 16; discuss self-introduction essays

Thurs (7/8): finish Himes and discuss films from Discussion board; intro to Waldie, *Holy Land* (SECTIONS to focus on: 1-32; 52-74; 84-94; 113-39; 194-206; 243-75; 284-91; 300-end; these are NOT page number but section numbers, about 60% of the total book)

Asynchronous: *Double Indemnity* (YouTube \$4); *Sunset Boulevard* (YouTube, \$4); *Zoot Suit* (Hulu); watch one and comment on discussion board before Thursday, 7/15, or KCET from "Lost LA"

Part Two: Post-War Expansion & Growing Pains

"There is no such thing as a friendly drink in noir." (*LA Times*)

Tues (7/13): continue Waldie, *Holy Land*; **presentation:** film noir & classic Hollywood; **presentation:** Disney & Disneyland; discuss essay one prompts; Blackboard: *LA Times* on film noir

Wed (7/14): continue in Waldie; **presentation:** Chavez Ravine & Dodger Stadium

Thurs (7/15): finish Waldie, *Holy Land*; Isherwood essay and diaries on Blackboard; work on essay in class; begin *Single Man*; **presentation:** Watts towers/Watts rebellion; **essay one due, Sunday 7/18 5pm PT**

Asynchronous: *A Single Man* (Netflix); *Chris & Don: A Love Story* (Amazon Prime or Fandor); *Walkout* (HBO online); *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (Starz or Amazon Prime); *Echo in the Canyon* (Netflix); *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold* (Netflix); watch one and comment on discussion board before class on Thursday, 7/22

Part Three: Transitional Years

"Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse. . . .
The wind shows us how close to the edge we are." (Joan Didion)

Tues (7/20): *Single Man*; Didion, "Los Angeles Notebook" on Blackboard; **presentation:** Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* and Charles Manson; **presentation:** music of Laurel Canyon

Wed (7/21): **presentation:** surf culture & music; finish Isherwood; first half of *Bridging the Divide: Tom Bradley*; begin *Play It As It Lays*

Thurs (7/22): finish Bradley documentary; continue Didion; discuss essay two prompts and Discussion Board film notes

Asynchronous: *Let It Fall* (Netflix); *Boyz 'n the Hood* (Hulu/Showtime; required for all); OJ Simpson documentary; *Twilight: Los Angeles* (Free on PBS); comment on *Boyz* on discussion board before Thursday, 7/29

Part Four: Trouble in Paradise: Looking for Contemporary LA

“Our art is a reflection of our reality.” (Ice Cube)

Tues (7/27): finish Didion; **presentation:** 1984 Olympics; watch *Boyz 'N the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and the trailer for *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989)

Wed (7/28): begin Cha, *Your House Will Pay*; excerpts from *Twilight: Los Angeles*

Thurs (7/29): continue Cha; finish *Boyz*; start *Straight Outta Compton* (F. Gary Gray, 2015)
share essay two draft for workshop; **turn in essay two via Turnitin by Sunday, 8/1 5 pm PT**

Asynchronous: *Straight Outta Compton* (required for all); *Jewel's Catch One* (Netflix); *Boys in Peril* (Vimeo; required for all; we may watch this together during class time); comment on discussion board before class on Thursday, 8/5

Tues (8/3): finish Cha; final exam assigned

Wed (8/4): view *Boys in Peril*; **presentation:** DACA & immigration issues in SoCal

Thurs (8/5): **presentation:** skid row; discuss socio-economic challenges of 21st century LA

Tues (8/10): final conversation; final exam due/discussion; course evaluations; **final exam and any other written work due by 9pm PT on 8/10**

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

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