

AMST 205: Introduction to American Popular Culture

Spring 2022 | Monday & Wednesday, 12:00 PM–1:50 PM

Stauffer Science Lecture Hall + Zoom

Professor Jonathan Leal, PhD

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

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Office Hours: by appointment

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, gamewinning 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 TikTok and streaming TV 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:

- 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
- 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

Required Materials and Subscriptions

Course Readings: Available on Blackboard / Online.

Netflix and Disney+ Accounts: 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 during these last two years of pandemic uncertainty; there's no way for a student to complete this course's assignment sequence without connecting with an elder 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 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: Synthesis and Reflection:** Complete Portfolio with Final Reflection (16%)

All deadlines are 10 PM Pacific Standard Time.

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.

Attendance

This iteration of "Introduction to American Popular Culture" will be taught using a hybrid format: in-person lectures and remote discussion sections. Due to the participatory nature of the course, the range of material, and the cumulative structure of the assignments, it's necessary that students attend all course meetings. That said: attendance will only be taken for section meetings, not for lectures.

During the semester, all students will be allowed up to three unexcused absences from their discussion section. Each unexcused absence beginning with the fourth will result in a half-letter grade penalty on the final course grade. Eight unexcused absences from the discussion section will result in an automatic failing grade for the course.

If you anticipate needing to miss a discussion section 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 please communicate with me and Angela as early as possible so we have everything on file. Similarly, if you need to quarantine at home due to COVID-related matters, follow USC’s official COVID protocols and reach out to the teaching team so we are aware of the situation.

Finally, given our still-active pandemic circumstances: each of our in-person lecture meetings will be recorded by way of a live, synchronous Zoom call, which will be uploaded to Blackboard. The goal of this is twofold: to provide a resource useful for your notes and to benefit students who would like to participate in our lecture meetings but need a remote accommodation due to health concerns.

Tardies

For your benefit and out of respect to your classmates, it’s important that you arrive to both lecture and section 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 Angela so we’re apprised of your situation.

Students arriving more than 20 minutes late to their discussion sections—or leaving more than 20 minutes early—will be marked absent.

Digital Contingency Plan

In the event that public health matters at USC and in LA County force us all to migrate back to an online format mid-semester, we will meet synchronously on Zoom at our normally scheduled class time.

Final Grades

Final course grades will be calculated based on a standard scale:

A: 100–93%
A-: 92–90%
B+: 89–87%
B: 86–83%
B-: 82–80%
C+: 79–77%
C: 76–73%
C-: 72–70%
D+: 69–67%
D: 66–63%
D-: 62–60%
F: 59% and below

USC Technology Support Links

[Blackboard help for students](#)

Course Schedule

Note: this syllabus is dynamic and open to adjustments as the course progresses.

Week 1: Popular Culture: Concepts

1/10:

Course Introduction

READ: Brandt and Clare, “Introduction to Popular Culture in the U.S.” (2018)

WATCH: [The Weeknd, "Sacrifice" \(2022\)](#), [from Dawn FM; FKA Twigs, "Tears in the Club" \(2021\)](#), [from Caprisongs \(2022\)](#).

1/12:

READ: Chayka, “Can the Monoculture Survive the Algorithm? And Should It?” (2019); Williams, “Residual, Dominant, and Emergent” (1976)
LISTEN: [100 geecs, 'mememe' \(2021\)](#).

Supplemental: [Kornhaber, "Noisy, Ugly, and Addictive: Hyperpop Could Become the Countercultural Sound of the 2020s," \(2021\)](#); Williams, “Culture” and “Masses,” (1976)

Assignment One Due on Friday, January 14 at 10 PM (Pacific): Introductory Questionnaire

Week 2: American Dreaming

1/17:

(Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, No Class)

1/19:

READ: Brandt and Clare, “Cultural Myths and the American Dream” (2018); Duggan, “Neoliberalism” (2014)

WATCH: “Nosedive,” *Black Mirror* (2016) (Netflix)

*Supplemental: Excerpt from Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983); Brandt and Clare, “Material Culture” (2018)*

Week 3: Extremely Online

1/24:

READ: [Tolentino, “The I in Internet” \(2019\)](#) from *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (2019)

1/26:

READ: Tolentino, “The Age of Instagram Face” (2019); Brandt and Clare, “Heroes and Celebrities” (2018)

Supplemental: Excerpt from Shoshana Zuboff, “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism” (2019); McMillan Cottom, “Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet: The Sociology of Race and Racism in the Digital Society” (2020); dltzk, [Frailty \(2021\)](#).

Assignment Two Due on Friday, January 28 at 10 PM (Pacific): Defining Popular Culture

Week 4: The Work of Representation

1/31:

READ: Henderson, “Representation” (2017)

WATCH: [Hall, “Representation and Media” \(1997\)](#).

2/2:

READ: Brandt and Clare, “Social Constructions of Identity” (2018)

LISTEN: [“Selena and Me,” Anything for Selena \(2021\)](#) (Podcast)

Supplemental: [Selena, “La Llamada” \(1993\)](#); [Zaragoza, “The Never-Ending Exploitation of Selena Quintanilla” \(2020\)](#); [Villarreal, “Selena, Dehistoricized” \(2020\)](#).

2/4:

In-class Interview Practice Exercise with Angela and fellow students (during discussion sections); this will enable you to complete Assignment Three.

Week 5: Race and Speculative Fiction

2/7:

READ: Martinez HoSang and Labennett, "Racialization" (2014)

LISTEN: [carrington, "On Race and Science Fiction" \(2016\)](#).

WATCH: Black Panther (2018) (Disney+)

Optional: Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" (1993)

2/9:

LISTEN: *Black Panther (Soundtrack Album, Executive Produced by Kendrick Lamar) (2018)*

Assignment Three Due on Friday, February 11 at 10 PM (Pacific): Interviewing Practice Exercise

Week 6: On Sport, Politics, and Spectacle

2/14:

WATCH: Super Bowl Halftime Show 2022 (February 13, 2022); 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)

READ: Real and Wenner, "Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle Revisited" (2017); Abdurraqib, "The Night Prince Walked On Water" (2017)

Supplemental: [Black Girl Songbook, "Whitney Houston's Super Bowl" \(2021\) \(Podcast\)](#); Brooks, "How #BlackLivesMatter Started a Musical Revolution" (2016)

2/16:

READ: [Fernández, "The Emotional Legacy of Tony Hawk's Pro Skater" \(2020\)](#); Thorpe and Wheaton, "The X Games: Re-Imagining Youth and Sport" (2017)

Supplemental: Neftalie Williams, Interview in Jenkem Magazine (2017)

Interviewee Consent Forms Due by Friday, February 18 at 10 PM (Pacific)

Week 7: On American Song

2/21:

(President's Day, No Class)

2/23:

READ: Kun, "Strangers Among Sounds" (2005)

Supplemental: Gruesz, "America" (2014); [reply-all, "The Case of the Missing Hit" \(2020\)](#).

Benchmark Date: Conduct Intergenerational Interview by Wednesday, February 23

Assignment Four Due on Friday, February 25 at 10 PM (Pacific): Intergenerational Interview (Brief Written Reflection on the Experience)

Week 8: Undergrounds

2/28:

READ: *Young, The Grey Album (Excerpts) (2012)*

3/2:

READ: 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)

Optional: [Wild Tongue \(2018\)](#); Leal, "Wild Tongue: A New Record of Rio Grande Valley Expression"

Week 9: On (New) Media, Storytelling, and Narrative Participation

3/7:

READ: [Mohammed, "Mastering Effects: Podcasts and the Authoritarian Voice" \(2019\)](#); [Weiner, "The Voices: Toward a Critical Theory of Podcasting" \(2014\)](#).

LISTEN: ["Cars," This American Life \(2013\)](#).

3/9:

WATCH: *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. The Reverend* (2020) (Netflix)

Optional: 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)

Assignment Five Due on Friday, March 11 at 10 PM (Pacific): Intergenerational Interview (Written Interview Transcription)

Week 10: Spring Break

March 14–18, 2022

Week 11: Music Video, Platforms, and Fandom

3/21:

READ: Vernallis, "Telling and Not Telling" (2004)

WATCH: [Rosalía, "CANDY" \(2022\)](#); [Lil Nas X, "Montero" \(2021\)](#); [HAIM, "I Know Alone" \(2020\)](#); [Billie Eilish, "My Future" \(2020\)](#); [Thao and the Get Down Stay Down, "Phenom" \(2020\)](#); [Beyoncé, "Formation" \(2016\)](#).

3/23:

READ: 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" \(2019\)](#)

Assignment Six Due on Friday, March 25 at 10 PM (Pacific): Engagement with the Primary Popular Cultural Object

Week 12: Culture Beyond Binaries

3/28:

READ: Halberstam, "Gender" (2014); Martinez HoSang, "Intersectionality" (2020)

LISTEN: ["Musical Shape-Shifting: The Many Pitches of Prince" from *Shattering Gleam: A Podcast About Music and Gender* \(2022\)](#)

Optional: *Play Your Gender* (2016) (iTunes); *Oscars 2022* (Airs Sunday, March 27, 2022)

3/30:

READ: 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 13: Buscando América

4/4:

WATCH: *Mucho Mucho Amor: The Legend of Walter Mercado* (2020) (Netflix)

Optional: [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!" \(2020\)](#)

4/6:

LISTEN: [Episode One: "The Zone," *Loud: The History of Reggaeton* \(2021\)](#)

Assignment Seven on Friday, April 8 at 10 PM (Pacific): Historicization of the Primary Popular Cultural Object

Week 14: On Criticism

4/11:

READ: 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"

4/13:

READ: [Sloan and Harding, "The Culture Warped Pop, For Good" \(2021\)](#); [del Valle Schorske, "The World According to Bad Bunny" \(2020\)](#)

LISTEN: [Abdurraqib, "Beyond Tastemaking," *Object of Sound* \(2021\)](#)

Week 15: Closeness, Distance

4/18:

SPECIAL EVENT @ 12:30 PM Pacific: "A Migrant Sound: Listening to the 21st Century," Presentation by Josh Kun, Doheny Memorial Library (DML 240). RSVP: kade@usc.edu

Event Description: "Cultural historian, writer, and curator Josh Kun will present new research on musical representations of contemporary migrant and refugee crises across the United States, Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Mixing work from migrant and refugee musicians with sonic experiments in contemporary art and literature, Kun listens for musical responses to a world of forced removals, expulsions, and detentions. In this century of mass displacement, is music a form that migration takes?"

4/20:

READ: Excerpt from Judith Butler, "Precarious Life and the Ethics of Cohabitation" (2015)

Week 16: The 2020s

4/25:

Jack Harlow, "First Class": https://youtu.be/HmP_wGYw1_g

Mahalia, "Whatever Simon Says": <https://youtu.be/AulwoPSTu6s>

Rex Orange County, "KEEP IT UP": https://youtu.be/k53_PzjpaA

Tory Lanez, "The Color Violet (Live)": <https://youtu.be/6HNFGLCaVFI>

Swedish House Mafia, "Time": <https://youtu.be/OtBFrK6Q82w>

4/27:

Harry Styles, "As It Was": <https://youtu.be/H5v3kku4y6Q>

Pink Floyd (feat. Andriy Khlyvnyuk of Boombox), "Hey Hey Rise Up": <https://youtu.be/saEpkcVi1d4>

Suran, "My Loneliness Calls You" (feat. translated lyrics): <https://youtu.be/1OkQxl0vwco>

Alexcis, Snow Tha Product, and T-Pain, "Until the Day (Remix)": <https://youtu.be/oP0QzyQXaxQ>

The Weeknd, "Out of Time": <https://youtu.be/2fDzCWNS3ig>

Course Wrap-Up

Final:

Assignment Eight Due on Friday, May 6 at 10 PM (Pacific): Final Reflection and Complete Cumulative Portfolio

The submission portal for this final assignment will open via Blackboard on Monday, May 2.

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.

COVID Safety

Students are expected to comply with all aspects of USC's COVID-19 policy. Failure to do so may result in removal from the class and referral to Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards.

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.