

**GESM 120: Los Angeles Stories (35333)**  
**Humanistic Inquiry (B)/Units: 4**  
**Spring 2022 T/Th 9:30-10:50 am GFS 104**

**Instructor: Dr. Chris Freeman**  
**Office: THH 410**  
**Office Hours: 2-3:15 pm and by appt.**  
**Contact Info: cefreema@usc.edu**



**Carlos Almaraz, “Echo Park at Night” 1989**

### **Course Description**

“Los Angeles Stories” 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; 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. 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.

### **Humanistic Inquiry Category**

“Los Angeles Stories” is an investigation into life in LA, from the story of an aspiring young Italian American writer, 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, “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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 and present that to the group, and you will write a research-based essay (1200-1800 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 (possibly Google doc?) from time to time; 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 being 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.

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**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.**

### Readings and Supplementary Materials

- 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
- Louis Negrete, *Chicano Homeland* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform 2016), Paperback:148 pages; ISBN-10: 1519355262; ISBN-13: 978-1519355263; also on Kindle
- Bret Easton Ellis, *Less than Zero* (1985) Vintage, 1998: ISBN: 978-0679781493
- Steph Cha, *Your House Will Pay* (Ecco, 2019): available on free Kindle app for \$13; also great version on Audible.com
- Charles Finch, *What Just Happened* (Random House, 2021)
- Films will likely include *Bridging the Divide: Tom Bradley* (Goldfarb, 2015); *Boyz 'N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991); *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015); *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 50 points
- Essays One and Two (4-6 pp.) 200 points x2
- Research Project/Presentation/paper (pairs) 300 points
- Take-Home Final Exam Essay (May 10, 10am) 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 10-15 minute presentation and an essay (1200-1800 words) based on your presentation; you have about 15 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. **Class participation includes showing up on time, paying attention, contributing to the conversation, and professional demeanor.**

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

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### Schedule of Assignments (subject to change as needed)

#### 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)

T, 1/11: 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

Th, 1/13: (Blackboard); begin Himes (ch 1 and 2); **discuss self-introduction essay, due via Turnitin on Friday, January 24**

T, 1/18: continue Himes; discuss excerpts from Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Blackboard); make choices for projects; discuss projects and choose topics; look at CAAM museum website

Th, 1/20: 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

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

T, 1/25: continue Himes up to chapter 16; discuss self-introduction essays, which are due 9/11 (Friday); SHORT MEETING THIS DAY (done at 10am)

Th, 1/27: finish Himes; talk about discussion board posts; introduce Waldie; 1/28: Last day for W and P/NP status

T, 2/1 : 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); prompts for essay one

Th, 2/3: continue Waldie; begin Negrete, *Chicano Homeland*

### **Part Two: Post-War Expansion & Growing Pains**

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

T, 2/8: continue Waldie, *Holy Land*; Blackboard: *LA Times* on film noir

Asynchronous: *Double Indemnity* (YouTube \$4); *Sunset Boulevard* (YouTube, \$4); *Zoot Suit* (Hulu); watch one and comment on discussion board before Thursday

Th, 2/10: finish Waldie; workshop on Essay One (have draft ready); continue in Negrete

T, 2/15: presentation on film noir & classic Hollywood; continue in Negrete

Th, 2/17: presentation on Disney & Disneyland; continue in Negrete

### **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)

T, 2/22: Isherwood on Los Angeles; continue in Negrete

Th, 2/24: Didion on Los Angeles on Blackboard; **Essay one due via Turnitin on Friday, 2/24 (1200-1500 words)**; Presentation on Chavez Ravine & Dodger Stadium

T, 3/1: presentation: Watts towers/Watts rebellion; continue Negrete

Th, 3/3: presentation: SoCal music, Beach Boys to The Eagles: Negrete, Chapter 4 on mid-60s; watch some of "Echo in the Canyon" if there's time

Asynchronous suggestions: *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 Monday

T, 3/8: Didion, "Los Angeles Notebook" on Blackboard; presentation: Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* and Charles Manson; continue in Negrete, chapter 5; start Almaraz documentary

Th, 3/10: finish Negrete; discuss essay two prompts; finish Carlos Almaraz documentary

SPRING BREAK: read *Less Than Zero*

#### **Part Four: Trouble in Paradise: Looking for Contemporary LA**

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

T, 3/22: begin *Less Than Zero*; Watch *Bridging the Divide: Tom Bradley and the Politics of Race* (2015) on Kanopy

Th, 3/24: finish the documentary; continue *Zero*

Asynchronous (required): *Straight Outta Compton* or *Boyz n the Hood* (half will watch one and half the other); comment on discussion board before class

T, 3/29: finish *Less than Zero*; presentation on the 1984 Olympics; watch on your own: *Boyz 'N the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and the trailer for *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989); post on discussion board/Google doc on *Boyz* and *SooC*; prompts for essay two

Th, 4/1: presentation on the LA Lakers and LA LIVE; discuss *SooC* and *Boyz*; begin Cha, *Your House Will Pay*

T, 4/5: watch short film, *Love Song for LaTasha* (2020); continue Cha; presentation on LACMA and the arts/gallery/museum scene in LA

Th, 4/7: continue Cha; 4/8: Last W day

T, 4/12: finish Cha; share essay two draft for workshop; presentation on Skid Row and Housing in LA; Finch, March, 2020

Th, 4/14: Finch, April-June 2020; watch half of *Boys in Peril*; **turn in essay two via Turnitin by Friday, 4/15**

T, 4/19: Finch, July-September 2020; finish and discuss *Boys in Peril*

Th, 4/21: Finch, October-December, 2020

T, 4/25: finish Finch; final exam assignment discussion

Th, 4/27: Dana Johnson, "The Story of Bidly Martin" (Blackboard); wrap up discussion and online course evaluations

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**Final exam & any other written work due by Tuesday, May 10<sup>th</sup> at 10am PT**

**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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](https://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](https://dps.usc.edu)

Dornsife provides a full range of mental health resources, which can be found at <https://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling/>

**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.**

See also:

<https://undergrad.usc.edu/services/>

<https://dornsife.usc.edu/writingcenter/>