PWP Summer 2016: ENG 350G
Literature of California: “Bookpacking” The Grapes of Wrath
Professor: Andrew Chater

SUMMARY

This 4-unit PWP course is an exercise in “bookpacking”, a humanities experience that explores a classic text ‘on the road’, fusing literature, history and contemporary social studies into a new form of cultural travel.

Our core text on this journey is ‘The Grapes of Wrath’.

Week 1 of this four-week course will be spent at USC, studying Californian fiction, with a focus on The Grapes of Wrath as the archetypal novel of the Californian Utopia / Dystopia.

Weeks 2 to 4 will be spent on the road, traveling west from Sallisaw, OK to Bakersfield, CA - where migrant laborers still work the fields as they did in the 1930s.

The challenge facing students will be to record their experience of “bookpacking”, describing how their empathetic response to novel is impacted by experience of reading ‘on the road’, and how their engagement with character and themes are informed and enriched by their interaction with the contemporary physical, human and political landscape.

COURSE SCHEDULE (4 weeks total)

• Week 1 - contextual study at USC
• Weeks 2 and 3 – road trip from Oklahoma to California
• Week 4 - field work in California’s Central Valley

WEEK 1

We will have five days at USC discussing The Grapes of Wrath in its historical and geographical context, understanding the Joads’ migration west as a part of a greater pattern of migration that has been part of the American psyche since the days of the Great Wagon Road.

We’ll discuss how this westward movement has been portrayed in a range of American novels, and we’ll show how California has been presented in fiction as the ultimate utopia and dystopia – both the fulfillment and the apocalyptic end of the American Dream.

We’ll make a particular study of Joan Didion’s Play It As It Lays and Nathaniel West’s The Day of the Locust, and a first paper, focusing on these two books, will be due at the end of this first week.

We’ll study the Dust Bowl, and the particular circumstances of the Dust Bowl Migration of the mid 1930s. We’ll compare this historical crisis with comparable crises in the contemporary world, notably the war in Syria and its impact on Europe.
We’ll look at Steinbeck’s politics, and the hostility with which The Grapes of Wrath was received by many, and we’ll contrast America’s political divisions in the 1930s with the contemporary political schism in election year, 2016.

*Week 1 hours: 9.30 to 12.00, 1.00 to 3.30 each day*

**WEEKS 2 and 3**

Weeks 2 and 3 will see us on the road, exploring The Grapes of Wrath as a fully immersive ‘bookpacking’ experience.

We’ll fly to Oklahoma City and travel west along Route 66, retracing the Joads’ journey from Sallisaw, OK, to Bakersfield, CA.

Re-reading The Grapes of Wrath sequentially as we visit locations en route, we’ll discover how reading a novel in this way deepens understanding and increases empathy, as we find echoes of the past in contemporary geographic and cultural realities.

We’ll study the towns along Route 66, many of them virtual ghost towns since the coming of the Interstate in the 1970s. We’ll interview residents about the dilemmas their families have faced - to stay or to go? - a dilemma echoed in the early chapters of The Grapes of Wrath. Students will begin work on a project cataloguing the ‘bookpackers’ experience using a range of media, including social media (Instagram etc).

Our route takes us past some of the most interesting and memorable sites in America. We’ll visit Amarillo, Santa Fe, Acoma Pueblo and the Grand Canyon. We will take the opportunity to study the various cultures of America's Southwest, including Native American, Chicano and Cowboy cultures.

**WEEK 4**

Our final week will be spent in California’s Central Valley, where the Joads searched for work on their arrival in California. We’ll visit Camp Weedpatch, an FSA camp described in Steinbeck's novel, where the Joads found respite along the road. This historic site now houses a migrant labor camp for mostly Latino workers, whose lives and aspirations mirror the Joads’. We will interview the workers and spend time with them in the fields, harvesting ‘stoop crops’. How do contemporary migrant lives in California’s Central Valley compare with the dystopian vision described by Steinbeck 80 years ago?

We’ll explore the legacy of the Dust Bowl on the Central Valley. Camp Weedpatch is tended by descendants of Dust Bowl migrants; they wear “Okie” T-shirts as a badge of pride. We'll investigate the cultural, musical, gastronomic, religious and political impact of Oklahoman culture in central Kern County, California.

We’ll spend a final day in Sequoia National Park before returning to LA.

The multimedia blog project will be due at the end of Week 4.

**EXPECTATIONS**
This PWP course will be intellectually demanding. The first week of classroom study is particularly intensive, and students not fully committed - to active engagement in five hours of lecture / discussion per day, to careful reading of two to three texts and a range of extracts, and then to vigorous participation in a busy schedule over three weeks on the road - will not succeed. But the rewards will be great, as we discover a new way to explore literature, and process challenging questions about the nature of the American experience, past and present.

Students will be expected to read two short novels within the first week of the course - Joan Didion's *Play It as it Lays* (1970), and Nathaniel West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939).

The course reader will contain a host of secondary readings and extracts for reference.

Students must also have read Chapters 1 to 11 of *The Grapes of Wrath*, ideally by the start of the course, but certainly no later than the first day of the second week. Students will then read the rest of the novel - Chapters 12 to 30 - sequentially as we travel.

One short paper (3-5 pages) will be due by the end of the first week, on Joan Didion / Nathaniel West.

For the remainder of the course (weeks 2 to 4) students will be expected to keep a multimedia blog recording the experience of “bookpacking” The Grapes of Wrath. Students should aim to write from 250 to 500 words a day, supplemented with pictures (Instagram etc), uploaded (and date-stamped) at least every 48 hours. The challenge is to describe an honest and original record of the experience of reading The Grapes of Wrath on the road. How does replicating the migrant journey affect our emphatic response to the Joads' story? And how do our encounters with contemporary parallels - Route 66 ghost towns, and modern migrant labor in the Central Valley - impact our understanding of Steinbeck’s political agenda?

**PRIMARY TEXTS**

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)
Nathaniel West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939)
Joan Didion, *Play It As It Lays* (1970)

+ excerpts from

  - Richard Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840)
  - Helen Hunt Jackson, *Ramona* (1884)
  - Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1929)
  - Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (1939)
  - Chester Himes, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go* (1945)
  - Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart* (1946)
  - José Antonio Villareal, *Pocho* (1959)
  - Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968)
  - Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972)

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

30%  Participation (attendance and discussion)

20%  Short Paper (3-5 pages) due end of Week 1

50%  Multimedia Project