

USC Dornsife
Department of English

FALL 2025

GRADUATE COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

History of Literary and Cultural Theory

Johnson, Dana & Handley, William

M | 5:00-7:50 PM

SECTION: 32773

Required of all first-semester graduate students in both PhD programs offered through the Department of English, this co-taught seminar introduces students to each other and to graduate study by engaging with important works of literary and cultural criticism and theory and by exploring matters of professionalization.



Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory

On Borders

Leal, Jonathan

T | 5:00-7:50 PM

SECTION: 32793

It's often implied that borders mark fixed, natural boundaries—hard edges between stable, timeless categories, permanent separations between unchanging communities. It's also often believed, mistakenly, that border spaces, be them geopolitical, conceptual, linguistic, artistic, or otherwise, are inherently and definitively hazardous—zones of vice and lawlessness in need of policing and martial intervention. Yet such stories, rooted in nationalist mythographies, omit far more than they advance. For as much as every border marks an edge, a boundary, a limit, so too does it mark a center—a zone of crossing, contact, creation, curation, and community.

In this course, we'll work to understand what borders are, how they work, and what they reveal about the pasts, presents, and potential futures of human movement and relation. We'll think through borders as myths, metaphors, physical materials, geopolitical contact zones, spaces of state containment, and sites of resistance, all while considering how concepts like nation-state and empire, representation and media, cartography and narrative, politics and surveillance capitalism, ontology and epistemology, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, class and culture, and art and experience are linked to what today's conceptual and geopolitical borders are and do. We'll explore these matters by way of contemporary theory, history, and scholarship from across the arts and humanities, as well as through music, literary art, television, movies, journalism, podcasts, documentaries, murals, photographs, and other materials and artifacts produced by various border thinkers. Our geographic focus will be the U.S.–Mexico border, and through it, we'll consider ideas of national sentiment, linguistic and cultural conflict, artistic and activist intervention, and local, regional, national, and transnational identities.

Image by Claude Monet, *Autumn Effect at Argenteuil*, 1873.

ENGL-535

Literatures and Cultures of the Romantic Period

Rebels with Cause: The Wollstonecraft-Godwin Family in Two Generations

Russett, Margaret

T | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32606

This seminar approaches the two “generations” of Romanticism (pre- and post-1800) from the perspective of a family circle’s two generations: Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, in the first generation; and Mary and Percy Shelley, in the second. Mary Wollstonecraft was the author of, among other works, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and *Maria; or, the Wrongs of Women*. Godwin wrote *Political Justice*, an important work of political philosophy, and many novels including his most famous, *Caleb Williams*. Mary Shelley, née Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, wrote most of *Frankenstein* (dedicated to Godwin) at age eighteen, and followed it with many other novels, including the posthumously published *Mathilda*, often described as a roman a clef about her relationship with her father. She met Percy Bysshe Shelley when the young poet presented himself as a pupil of Godwin. After their elopement, Percy Shelley wrote his most famous and experimental works of poetry, including *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Triumph of Life*.

Among the concerns of all four were love, family, reproduction, and their discontents. Accordingly, our readings and discussions will revolve, in part, around the writers’ various critiques of existing relational structures and their attempts to imagine new forms of relationship. We will read all the works listed above (and more), in tandem with recent biographical and historical scholarship that explores the writers’ many connections with signal events and other leading figures of their times. Participants’ contributions to the class will include researched presentations on lesser-known works by these four, as well as lesser-known members of their menage, such as Fanny Imlay, Claire Clairmont, and the younger William Godwin. Depending on interest, there may be a digression from family to friendship, so we can pause at the famous summer of 1816, when the two Shelleys were briefly part of the Byron circle--and Mary began *Frankenstein*.



Image by Andrew Howat, *Shelley's Death*, undated.

19th Century British Literatures and Cultures

British Visual Culture 1880-1910

Flint, Kate

M | 11:00-1:50 PM

SECTION: 32784

This course will consider a complex and contradictory period in British history and culture: 1880-1910. It will approach this challenge through the visual culture of the time, in all its forms – from painting and engravings through advertisements and wallpaper, photography and film. During this period, Britain was at the center of global networks that ensured the circulation of people and ideas, capital and culture, and material goods. Excitement was generated by contact with the new and the different; by the idea of the “modern.” Yet many aspects of national culture were inward looking, parochial, and blindly complacent to broader changes in the world – or rather, were seeking to pretend these changes were not happening, or were anxious about such change. Literature and art were simultaneously experimental - looking to break with verbal and visual traditions; speculating about the future - and steeped in nostalgia. Both stances were modes of acknowledging and addressing the unprecedented amount of social and cultural change that marked these thirty years. This course will address some pressing questions in visual and literary studies: periodization, chronology and asynchronicity; regional, national and global identities and connectivity; the politics of race and gender; form, style, medium, and materiality; the impact of scientific and mechanical innovation; the natural world and environmental change.

In 1896, literary critic George Saintsbury claimed that it was his constant aim to take an “achromatic” view of literature – by which he meant as objective an account as possible. By contrast, I start from the position that all our readings, spectatorship, and histories are deeply colored by our own personalities, intellectual and political positions and prejudices, and the contexts in which we encounter cultural work. To this end, I’m going to organize the course in a defiantly chromatic way: expect classes on black and white, blue, yellow, and green, silver, grey and gold.

Primary texts are likely to include works by Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle, Arthur Symons, Henry James, Charlotte Mew, May Sinclair, Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, and D. H. Lawrence, and writers who are commonly referred to as “new women,” “decadents,” “symbolists,” “Imagists,” and “Georgian poets” – even as we’ll also be questioning the problems and limitations that are set up by established labels and categories when it comes to writing cultural history with fresh eyes. In visual terms, we’ll range through realism, symbolism, and early modernist experimentation, by way of photography and early cinema, the Arts and Crafts movement, illustrated magazines, and suffrage pageantry.



Image by John Singer Sargent, *Portrait of Madame X*, 1884.

Individual Writers

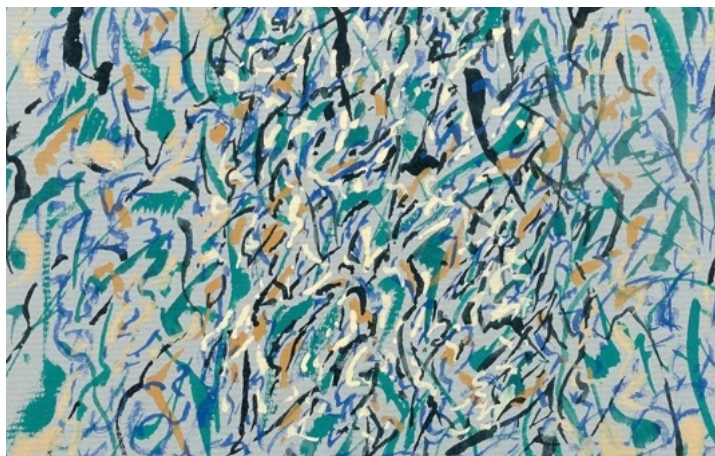
Roland Barthes

Nelson, Maggie

M | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32814

This seminar will focus on the work of theorist, critic, philosopher, teacher, and essayist Roland Barthes (1915-1980). Though we will pay some attention to Barthes's work as a semiotician and his role in structuralism and post-structuralism, our primary focus will be on Barthes as an innovative writer, with a special focus on the "late work," including *Camera Lucida*, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *A Lover's Discourse*, *Mourning Diary*, and the posthumously published lecture notes for his courses at the Collège de France, *The Neutral* and *How to Live Together*. We will also read work by people influenced by Barthes, and use him as a portal for thinking about writing that slides between criticism, theory, and the personal and creative. We will also consider him as an example of a devoted intellectual writing in time through some of the most turbulent years of the 20th century.



Above Image by Roland Barthes, *Composition*, 1972.

Right Image by Tsherin Sherpa, *The Melt*, 2017.

Multicultural Literary Studies

What Was Asian American Literature?

Hu, Jane

W | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32815

For the past 30 years, Asian American literature has been said to be in constant crisis. As changes in immigration laws continue to alter the demographics of "Asian America," it has become increasingly difficult to say what exactly counts as "Asian American writing." In the 21st century, who gets to speak or write on behalf of Asian Americans? What constitutes a so-called "Asian American story"? And what does it mean to read Asian American novels that contain no Asian American characters or themes?

Adapting the title of Kenneth Warren's recent intervention in African American Studies, this class explores the history of Asian American literary formation since the 1960s, focusing specifically on its emergence and institutionalization through the novel. We will explore the changing racial landscape of Asian America by reading a series of contemporary Asian American novels that don't conform to the tradition or expectations of ethnic literature. We will read a range of contemporary Asian American/Anglophone fiction, to explore the shifting generic expectations surrounding ethnic American writers. In doing so, we will learn about the history of the Asian American literary canon, while also asking questions about what might be in store for its uncertain future.



ENGL-660

Studies in Genre

Race and the Novel

Román, Elda María

W | 5:00-7:50 PM

SECTION: 32816

The aim of this seminar is to give you an in-depth understanding of how the novel as a genre has been theorized and how ethnic writers have developed the novel form. Most foundational scholarship on the novel has been written about texts produced by white European and U.S. writers. In this course, we will examine novels by Native, Black, Asian American, and Latinx authors alongside readings in narrative theory to ask what the theory productively illuminates about the text as well as what it cannot account for. Topics include: the origins of the novel; the- orizations of structure, time and space, perspective, voice, novelistic subjectivity; as well as innovations in the Bildungsroman, metafiction, speculative fiction, and hybrid forms.

ENGL-693

Graduate Nonfiction Form and Theory

Treuer, David

TH | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32823

One of the pleasures (and perils) of nonfiction is that it can (almost) take any shape. This makes it different than fiction. There is, it feels, much more diversity in CNF than there is in fiction. Braided. Circular. Plotted. Meandering. Autobiograph- ical. Linear. Story-like. Chronological. CNF can be, it seems, “like” almost anything. It is fundamentally Protean.

It is my belief that nonfiction can and should be a way of thinking and that for every NF project there is, out there (or rather, IN HERE—”here” being your brain), the perfect shape: that the shape of the thought or question will, in turn, shape the story; that the form will ideally mirror what it contains; that what it contains determines the form.

As such, this course will be something of a hybrid, the coming together of three different narratives. We will read and analyze examples of the form, produce analyses of those examples, and write and lightly workshop our own narratives.

ENGL-696

Graduate Poetry Writing Workshop

Journey, Anna

TH | 4:30-7:20 PM

SECTION: 32826

In C.D. Wright’s poem “Traveller,” from her early collection *Terrorism*, the author’s imagination appears as quirky, alert, and restless as the poem’s roving speaker who confides, with a wry bravura: “I tried to draw my shadow on the ceiling / with some charcoal it wouldn’t be still.” In this graduate poetry workshop, we’ll approach Wright’s newly published oeuvre-spanning posthumous volume, *The Essential C.D. Wright* (edited by Forrest Gander and Michael Wieggers), as an occasion to celebrate restlessness as an aesthetic whose only tenant is a rebellious insistence on the imagination’s refusal to “be still.”

Famously contrarian, adventurously experimental, Wright offers poets a model for a lifelong poetic practice that is at once reckless and rigorous, omnivorous and immune to the bandwagon mannerisms of the period style. In addition to Wright’s collection, we will read and discuss books by four or five other contemporary poets, using their work as an opportunity to reflect on and inspire work by members of the class.

So, fellow traveler, what’s your shadow on the ceiling been up to lately?

ENGL-697

Graduate Fiction Writing Workshop

Danzy, Senna

T | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32827

In this graduate fiction workshop, students will present their works in progress and read the works of their peers. The workshop will be a generative space to produce new work and consider questions of process, craft and revision.

Academic Writing

Dissertation Bootcamp

Cohen, Ashley

TH | 4:30-7:20 pm

Section: 32840

In order to make good progress on your dissertation, it is critical that you complete one chapter every semester. This course is designed to help you do that. We will begin with the question of what belongs in a chapter, and what doesn't. We will then learn the best methods for getting writing (and thinking!) done on a regularly scheduled basis. We will discuss how to write for an audience, and how to write effectively at

the sentence, paragraph, and section levels. We will talk about how to manage research, including how to keep track of all those notes and citations, and how to handle secondary scholarship in your chapter. We will also discuss how to solicit feedback and what to do with it, i.e., revision and rewriting. Finally, we will have an optional unit on archival research and working with primary sources. Along the way, we will form solidarity groups designed to build community and help keep each other on track.



Image by Margaret C. Cook, *"We have voided all but freedom and all but our own joy."* 1913.

Graduate Poetry Form and Theory

McCabe, Susan

T | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32828

*"We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;
We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident
As the rock and ocean that we were made from."*

—Robinson Jeffers, "Carmel Point"

This course will be focused on poetry that falls within the genre of eco-poetics, a poetry dedicated to the earth, to struggling to find words for wonder and contemporary responses to ecological crisis, to apocalyptic realism, the threat of human extinction, micro and macro ecosystems. We will also examine varying inflection points—gender, race, sex, belief system, aesthetics, the mystical, for each poet as they approach ecological pleasures or disasters with varying responses of despair to dedicated poetic activism. Beginning as touchstones, Wordsworth, Emerson, Whitman, we will also read Eliot, Robinson Jeffers, H.D., Harryette Mullen, Jorie Graham, Brenda Hillman, Natalie Diaz, Bhanu Kapil, among others. We will also read ecological "science" texts, looking for guidance from Suzanne Simard's *The Mother Tree*, Merlin Sheldrake's *Entangled Life*, and other contemporary monographs on the consciousness of plant life as well as "inanimate" existence.

Each poet we read uniquely approaches the historical and cultural terror of human trespass and eco-injury, urgently spelled out in our skies, trees, flowers, waters, grasses, lichen, animals, insects, and inanimate "things," which perforce we read within and against the long-standing structures of white supremacy, ego-centrism, and capitalism. How does a poet still sustain reverence? How does a poet resist and be activist? Many more questions will visit us as we explore your creative approach to the ecological in poetry and aesthetics.

You will be asked to write several poems and two lyric essays and a review.

CONTACT US

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D-CLEARANCE REQUESTS:

Contact **Janalynn Bliss** (jbliss@usc.edu) to request D-clearance for graduate workshop and form and theory courses.

Contact **Andrea Leal** (leala@usc.edu) to request D-clearance for other PhD courses in the Department of English.