

Los Angeles: A Polymathic Inquiry
Guided by the writings of Carey McWilliams, Part B
USC Dornsife College of Letters and Sciences
Thematic Option CORE 499

Fall 2014 – Part A/Spring 2015 – Part B

Wednesdays 2:00p – 3:50p

USC Sidney Harman Academy for Polymathic Study, DML 241

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Co-Instructor, Course Tutor:

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Course Description

This course is a 4-unit course spread over Fall 2014 (Part A) and Spring 2015 (Part B) semesters, consisting of 2 units per semester. The course will have one senior instructor/discussion leader and one co-instructor/course tutor. Each student will also be assigned a USC librarian archivist who specializes in the specific term paper/project topic chosen by the student. Each class meeting will have a block of required and suggested readings, and a guest lecturer, who will enter into dialogue with the course instructors and students. The writings of Carey McWilliams – specifically, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (1946) – will provide the framework and departure points for discussion.

Learning Objectives

As social, cultural, engineering, environmental, and demographic constructs, cities are among the most complex entities on the planet. As a world city, Los Angeles participates in this complexity. To study a city in its components and its totality, its people and its systems, its physical fabric and moral meaning, is by definition an integrated, interdisciplinary – *polymathic* – pursuit. Carey McWilliams—attorney, historian, journalist, civil rights activist, even prophet—wrote about Southern California from a polymathic perspective. In this course Professor of History William Deverell, Dr. Karin Huebner, and distinguished Los Angeles experts will guide students through a two-part, yearlong polymathic inquiry into Los Angeles as fact and imaginative creation.

No prerequisites required.

Requirements/Grading – Part B

For the Spring 2015 semester, students will be graded on recitation in class, their personal course journal, a class presentation of their project, and a research project/paper.

- 1. Recitation (15% toward each semester grade):** Be ready to share your thoughts and ask questions that have arisen from both the readings and lectures. *Everyone* must participate in the discussion each week. Your efforts and contribution to the overall learning and discussion process will be noted, evaluated, and graded. A successful session depends on your participation. This is the time for you to sort out any questions you might have, gain insight from the exchange of ideas with other students and faculty, and share your unique perspectives on the topics we are examining.
- 2. Personal Course Journal (30% towards each semester):** students are required to reflect and record on a weekly basis their scholarly journey in terms of the course readings, class discussions, personal research, and ongoing dialogues with their student colleagues and

course faculty. Students will review their weekly journaling with the course tutor during their scheduled bi-weekly meetings.

3. **Class presentation** of research project/paper (10% towards Spring semester grade)
4. **Research Project/Paper (45% towards Spring semester grade):** [paper is to be 15+ pages, double-spaced with footnotes and bibliography]

Required texts for Fall 2014 Part A and Spring 2015 Part B (texts not posted on blackboard are available for purchase at the USC bookstore)

1. Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (1946)
2. *Blackwell Companion to Los Angeles*, William Deverell and Greg Hise, eds. (selected readings available on blackboard)
3. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (2009)
4. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (1990)
5. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998) (readings available on blackboard)
6. William Deverell and Greg Hise, *Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles* (<http://digital.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/t/text/text-idx?idno=31735062135573;view=toc;c=pittpress>)
7. Joan Didion, (selected readings)
8. Joe Dominick, *To Protect and Serve: The LAPD's Century of War in the City of Dreams* (2003)
9. Douglas Flamming, *Bound For Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (2006)
10. Judith Freeman, *The Long Embrace: Raymond Chandler and the Woman He Loved* (2008 reprint edition)
11. Leo Braudy, *The Hollywood Sign: Fantasy and Reality of an American Icon* (2012)
12. Phoebe Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place*
13. Nathaniel West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939)
14. Readings from LA as SUBJECT: <http://www.laassubject.org/>
15. Selected readings available on blackboard

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COURSE SCHEDULE

SPRING 2015 LOS ANGELES: A POLYMATHIC INQUIRY -- PART B

January 14 – OPENING SESSION

LAW AND ORDER

Los Angeles is a curious metropolis when it comes to law and order. It has spawned a vibrant form of *noir* fiction and fact, a place of evil and corruption played out in real life and on the screens of cinema and television, malevolence reinforced in imagination and harsh reality. In this week, we ask – with specific reference to the place known both as “the city of Angels” and “Los Diablos,” what exactly constitutes the fundamental rationale for police power and authority in contemporary American society? And how is such a scheme reflected in the LAPD, Sheriff’s office, and related police agencies? Why has police authority as citadel been so problematic in Los Angeles past and present? From whence comes this obsession with noir? And why so many urban disturbances of extraordinary magnitude? How does Los Angeles stack up when it comes to the basic responsibility of a city, any city, to ensure public order and safety? And when does policing and police power simply go too far and become its own brutalizing feature of the present?

Guest discussant: Robert Saltzman, Gould School of Law, USC and member of the Los Angeles Police Commission.

Required readings:

- Joe Domanick, *To Protect and to Serve: The LAPD's Century of War in the City of Dreams* (2003)
- Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* Prologue, chapters 1, 4 and 5.

January 21

STUDENT/INSTRUCTOR-TUTOR MEETINGS

January 28

ENTERTAINMENT

Carey McWilliams figured Los Angeles gave him a “ringside seat at the circus” of human comedy and tragedy. Today’s session explores the entertainment ethos within Los Angeles, both as expressed by the film industry and Hollywood and in the daily life of a metropolis often caricatured as a giant stage upon which people act out their lives far short of fame. Few, if any, cities in the world today have this entertainment factor more essential to their DNA code. Topics to be considered include: the rise of motion pictures, radio and television; professional sports, music, restaurants, clubs, nightlife in general; non-professional recreation of every sort.

Guest discussant: Professor Josh Kun, Annenberg School and American Studies & Ethnicity

Required readings:

- Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (hereafter, Williams, *SC*), chapter 16, pgs. 330-349.
- Nathaniel West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939)
- Flamming, *Bound For Freedom*: chapters 8, 9, and 10.
- Edward Dimendberg, “Cinema and the Making of a Modern City,” in *Blackwell Companion to Los Angeles* available electronically:
<http://zb5lh7ed7a.search.serialssolutions.com/?V=1.0&L=ZB5LH7ED7A&S=JCs&C=TC0000414482&T=marc>

February 4

STUDENT/INSTRUCTOR-TUTOR MEETINGS

February 11

SEMIOTICS, or, ONLY IN LA

What does LA *mean*? And how does meaning get inscribed in and on the LA landscape? How does the metropolis make its own symbols and myths, in the shorthand of insider knowledge or experience or tradition? Like every great city, Los Angeles constitutes a total communication system. Does this system have a discernible grammar, syntax, and symbolism? If so, how does it work? If not, why not?

Guest discussant: David Ulin

Required readings:

- Williams, *SC*, chapter 13, pgs. 249-272.
- Goeff Stahl, “Urban Semiotic,” *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies* (2010) available electronically:
<http://knowledge.sagepub.com/view/urbanstudies/n320.xml?rskey=b4qhSe&row=1>

February 18

STUDENT/INSTRUCTOR-TUTOR MEETINGS

February 25

REFRACTIONS: REAL LA?

From one perspective, Los Angeles the memoir, novel, the film, the television program, the poem, the song, the dance, the art, the architecture, even the cuisine, constitute an integrated symbol system and ongoing expression and archive of interpretation. Is there a common aesthetic in all of this, or at least recognizable patterns? Of what value is Los Angeles the metaphor to Los Angeles the real place? Or are they interchangeable?

Guest discussants: **TBD**

Required readings:

- Leo Braudy, *The Hollywood Sign: Fantasy and Reality of an American Icon* (2012)
- Judith Freeman, *The Long Embrace: Raymond Chandler and the Woman He Loved* (2008 reprint edition)
- Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, chapter 7.

March 4

STUDENT/INSTRUCTOR-TUTOR MEETINGS

March 11

HEALTH

McWilliams knew his health history of Los Angeles. Today we balance the history of cities as generally healthful places compared to other locales against the Los Angeles of melancholy, ill health, respiratory disease, and pulmonary distress. Can we understand Los Angeles at all without fervent reference to dying? What is the significance of the rise of Los Angeles as a medical and health care global capital? What do the statistics show regarding the health of the Los Angeles population, physical and mental? Should we be gratified, concerned, or a mixture thereof?

Guest discussant: Professor David Sloane

Required readings:

- Williams, *SC*, review chapter 14, pgs. 273-313.
- David Sloane, "Landscapes of Health and Rejuvenation," in *Blackwell Companion to Los Angeles* available electronically:
<http://zb5lh7ed7a.search.serialssolutions.com/?V=1.0&L=ZB5LH7ED7A&S=JCs&C=TC0000414482&T=marc>

March 16-21 SPRING BREAK

March 25

DANGERS

The image of Los Angeles in flames or in one or another various modes of apocalyptic catastrophe seems to have haunted Los Angeles from its American beginnings. Through statistics of crime, health, social psychology, public policy, economics and distributions of wealth we shall investigate Los Angeles as solution to the problem or enduring problem in search of a solution. What, in short, are the things that are going wrong, or can go wrong, that might defer, deflect, or destroy the promise of the city? Did McWilliams believe in a Los Angeles of hope, of despair? What do *we* think?

Guest discussant: TBD

Required readings:

- Williams, *SC*, review chapter 10, pgs. 183-204.
- Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, review chapters 1, 2, and read chapter 3 (excerpts available on blackboard)

April 1

STUDENT/INSTRUCTOR-TUTOR MEETINGS

April 8

FUTURES

Is Los Angeles the future? Does Los Angeles have a future? Is it the future to be inherited by all cities? Does Los Angeles project itself into the future? How and why? How do we measure LA futures? We shall also consider such diverse topics as family life, birth rates, residential and work patterns, and – yes! – transportation, the sheer ability to get around the place, indeed, the question of whether or not we will have to get around the place to survive at some future time.

Guest Discussant: Shrikanth Narayanan

Required readings:

- Williams, *SC*, chapter 17, pgs. 350-370; “Epilogue,” pgs. 371-378.
- RAND Corporation studies:
<http://randstatestats.org.libproxy.usc.edu/index.php?randxdata=Y3VycmVudF9pcF9vZl91c2VyOjM0NixzZXNzaW9uX2lkOjRjOTk0NjVmMGE0NWNjYzNkMmNkMjk5NmM1ZTg1YzVh>
- Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, chapters 6 and 7.
- *Blade Runner* – 1982 film (available on reserve at Leavey Library) loosely based on the 1928 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick.

April 15

STUDENT/INSTRUCTOR-TUTOR MEETINGS

April 22 – CONCLUDING SESSION – PART B

STUDENT ORAL PRESENTATIONS

May 6-13, 2015: TERM PAPER/PROJECT DUE

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 to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website and contact information for DSP:
http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html, (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) ability@usc.edu.

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *SCampus*, the Student Guidebook, (www.usc.edu/scampus or <http://scampus.usc.edu>) contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.