

*Los Angeles: A Polymathic Inquiry*  
Guided by the writings of Carey McWilliams  
USC Dornsife College of Letters and Sciences  
CORE 450

**PART B – SPRING SEMESTER**

2 units/semester

USC Sidney Harman Academy for Polymathic Study, DML 241

Instructor:  
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**Course Description and 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, or – *polymathic* – pursuit. Carey McWilliams—attorney (USC Law School), 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 several distinguished Los Angeles experts will guide students through a polymathic inquiry into Los Angeles as fact and imaginative creation.

This course will have one senior instructor and one co-instructor/course tutor. Maximum enrollment is fifteen students with each student assigned a USC librarian archivist who will assist with the students' specific term paper/project topics. Throughout the semester, the class will also visit various sites of importance across the Southern California region for on-site learning opportunities to expand an understanding of Los Angeles across polymathic modes of experience. These include: The Huntington Library, The Los Angeles Natural History Museum, La Brea Tar Pits, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and Disneyland.

The class is preparation for intense and in-depth research for undergraduate students. The course tutor works closely with students throughout the semester in twice-monthly one-on-one meetings. The course expands modes of analysis through polymathic learning, which will prepare the student entering the increasingly complex 21<sup>st</sup> century global community that requires inter/multidisciplinary approaches for innovation, problem solving, and ultimately success.

Broad learning objectives for this course include: 1) immersion in the conventions of academic research through guided instruction and mentoring by course and library faculty – i.e., forming research questions, learning methodological practice, developing bibliographies, understanding evidence and data collection, forms of representation and presentation; 2) in-depth understanding of Los Angeles “in its components and in its totality” and awareness of how the approaches used might be applied to the study of other cities or other topics; and, 3) understanding of evolving, historical notions of “polymathy” through exposure to disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches across the academy.

## **Requirements/Grading**

Students will be graded on their course journal, a bibliographical essay, a research proposal, class presentation, and final paper/project.

1. **Course Journal (20% -- weekly):** 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.
2. **Class presentation of research project/paper (10% -- presentations WEEK 15)**
3. **Research Project/Paper (70% -- due on assigned day of final)**  
[a paper is to be 15+ pages, double-spaced with footnotes and bibliography of primary and secondary sources, and a list of the collections, archives, and repositories consulted; a project must include an annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources, and a list of the collections, archivals, and repositories consulted].

## **Required Texts—PART A/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. Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939)
14. Readings from LA as SUBJECT: <http://www.laassubject.org/>

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## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **WEEKS 1-2**

**January 13, 2016**

### ***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 for lecture, guest presentation and roundtable, and course discussion:

- 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.

Tutorials: (Throughout the semester, tutorials will include immersion in close reading aimed at improving comprehension of course materials, planning and advisement on course research project, and writing analysis. In these one on one and small group meetings, students conceptualize and develop their projects under the guidance and supervision of the Course Tutor and individually appointed Research Librarians.)

Week 2:

Tutorial in Spatial Sciences & GIS Mapping with Andrzej Rutkowski, Interdisciplinary GIS Library Fellow.

Individual tutorials--planning and advisement on course research project, and writing analysis. In this one on one meeting, student reviews and further develops their project under the guidance and supervision of the Course Tutor. Includes review of student's course journal entries, collected source materials, and the week's assigned readings as each relates to student's course project.

## **WEEKS 3-4**

**January 27, 2016**

### ***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 for lecture, guest presentation and roundtable, and course discussion:

- McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (hereafter, Williams, *SC*), chapter 16, pgs. 330-349.
- Nathaniel West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939)
- Douglas 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>

Week 4:

On-site class at Disneyland. USC Professor Vanessa Schwartz, Professor of History and Art History, with expertise on the iconic space, will guide our students in an on-site investigation of Disneyland's problematic historic and global representation of American ideals of gender, race, ethnicity, and class.

One primary curricula of the course, alongside on-campus class sessions, are off-campus class excursions to important cultural and educational sites pertaining to Los Angeles. The Disneyland excursion is a critical aspect of the experiential polymathic understanding of Los Angeles.

## **WEEKS 5-6**

**February 10, 2016**

### ***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 for lecture, guest presentation and roundtable, and course discussion:

- McWilliams, *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>

Week 6:

Individual tutorials--planning and advisement on course research project, and writing analysis. In this one on one meeting, student conceptualizes and develops their project under the guidance and supervision of the Course Tutor. Includes review of student's course journal entries, collected source materials, and the week's assigned readings as each relates to student's course project.

Individual one-hour meetings with appointed librarian to review and advise bibliographical essay and primary/secondary sources relating to student's project.

## **WEEKS 7-8**

**February 24, 2016**

### ***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: Leo Braudy, University Professor

Required readings for lecture, guest presentation and roundtable, and course discussion:

- 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.

Week 8:

Class field trip to the Huntington Library, Munger Research Center. Guided by Professors Deverell and Huebner, students will be taken through holdings in the vault, tutored in the research process, and exposed to rare collections at the Huntington Library. Professor Deverell will also hold a discussion session at the Library on the history of Collis P. Huntington and the Huntington Library and these histories' relevance to understanding Los Angeles.

## **WEEKS 9-10**

**March 9, 2016**

### ***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 for lecture, guest presentation and roundtable, and course discussion:

- McWilliams, *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&I=ZB5LH7ED7A&S=JCs&C=TC0000414482&T=marc>

## **Week 10:**

Film screening of *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott. Discussion on dystopic representations of LA in film and literature – real or imagined? – in preparation for WEEKS 11 and 13 topics on *Dangers* and *Futures*.

## **WEEKS 11-12**

**March 23, 2016**

### ***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 for lecture, guest presentation and roundtable, and course discussion:

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

### Week 12:

Over-night field trip to Southern California Edison Hydroelectric Project, Big Creek, CA. Guided by SCE Project Manager John Mount and Museum Executive Director Lisa Crain, students will visit the still operating SCE company town nestled in the High Sierras, gain access to functioning power stations, turbines, and dams, and learn firsthand how Los Angeles as a megalopolis was made possible by the Hydroelectric Project conceptualized by Henry Huntington at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They will see firsthand the interconnectedness of the city to massive infrastructure projects hidden in the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range.

### **WEEK 13-14**

**April 6, 2016**

#### **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 for lecture, guest presentation and roundtable, and course discussion:

- McWilliams, *JC*, 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.

### Week 14:

Individual tutorials--planning and advisement on course research project, and writing analysis. In this one on one meeting, student reviews and further develops their project under the guidance and supervision of the Course Tutor. Includes review of student's course journal entries, collected source materials, and the week's assigned readings as each relates to student's course project. Preparation, review, and advisement on student's oral presentation and final project.

### **WEEK 15 – CONCLUDING SESSION**

**April 27, 2016**

#### **STUDENT ORAL PRESENTATIONS**

#### **FINAL EXAM DATE:**

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](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](mailto: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](http://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.