

FYSP 193
Fall 2004
Tu Th 1:30-2:45
King 221

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“DESTINATION: L.A.”

What do you think about when you think about Los Angeles? Do you envision Hollywood starlets and screenwriters parading up and down Rodeo Drive? Do you imagine miles of snarled freeway traffic, smog-red sunsets settling over a chemically hazy skyline, and mindless drones churning out pop-culture piffle? Or, do you picture a city on fire, with entire blocks of East L.A. destroyed, businesses razed, and families displaced, during the aftermath of the Rodney King trial? This course will ask students to consider the various ways in which the “City of Angels” has been imagined, filmed, and written about. Weaving together depictions of L.A. drawn from a wide array of sources (including novels, film, drama, urban studies, ecology, and social science), the class will explore how these differing constructions of Los Angeles reveal critical, unresolved questions about America’s ever-evolving demographic and ever-shifting cultural and social geography. While Los Angeles is certain to evoke different images for different people—a land of opportunity, a disaster waiting to happen, a hot bed of racial strife—the goal of this course is not to determine which image is “correct,” but to understand and appreciate the complexities that go into the making of these images.

Required Texts:

John Fante, *Ask the Dust*
James Ellroy, *L.A. Confidential*
Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit and Other Plays*
Joan Didion, *Play It As It Lays*
Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*

All texts are available at the campus bookstore.

In addition to these required texts, there will also be several films and some supplemental readings, placed on reserve in the library. These include:

Film: *L.A. Confidential*
Film: *Zoot Suit*
Film: *Zoot Suit Riots*
Film: *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*
Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*
Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*
Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*
David Ulin, ed., *Writing Los Angeles: A Literary Anthology*

Course Requirements:

Attendance:

You *must* attend every class session, with the exception of three unexcused absences. For every unexcused absence thereafter, your *final* grade will be lowered by *one third*. This means that if you miss class four times, a final grade of B+ will drop to a B; if you miss class five times, a final grade of B+ will drop to B-.

Written Work:

There will be three main papers due during the course of the semester.

The first paper (3-4 pages) will be a detailed critical reading of John Fante's novel *Ask the Dust*. The paper will focus on one area of the text and use critical reading to shape an argument based on textual analysis.

- *This paper will count for 20% of your grade.*

The second paper (4-5 pages) will be a comparative examination of James Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential* and Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*. This paper will require the use of these two texts in conjunction with sources you'll find through directed research.

- *The second paper will count for 20% of your grade.*

The final paper (5-6 pages) will focus on combining research of your own devising with any of the texts on the reading list. The paper will require you to use at least three outside sources in addition to the text of your choice.

- *The final paper will count for 25% of your grade.*

The first two papers will require a rough draft, and will go through a rigorous process of peer editing. Peer editing will play an increasingly important role not only in getting you crucial feedback about your paper, but also in allowing you to hone your critical reading and writing skills. Peer edits and rough drafts will be graded.

- *Peer edits will count for 10% of your grade.*
- *Rough drafts will count for 10% of your grade.*

In addition to these three graded papers, there will be a number of ungraded assignments due throughout the course of the semester. These will be evaluated using a check, check-minus, or check-plus system, and will count towards class participation. These assignments are all listed on the syllabus, and you'll receive a handout about each assignment before it's due (I will also post assignments on Blackboard, in case you miss class).

- *These ungraded assignments will count towards your class participation grade.*

Late papers will be penalized by *one third* of a grade for *every full day* beyond the original time and due date that the paper is not turned in. This means: if a paper is due on Thursday at the beginning of class, and you turn it in on Monday morning, your grade will drop from a B+ to a C+; if that same paper is turned in on Monday evening, your grade will drop to a C. All assignments should be turned in at the beginning of class. Papers must be typed; assignments can be typed or written, but please write legibly.

Class Participation:

Your participation in class plays a crucial role in making this class interesting, educational, entertaining, and intellectually satisfying. To this end, *all students* are expected to participate in class discussions and activities. Along with being prepared—by completing readings on time, turning in (both graded and ungraded) assignments and papers on time, and attending class with regularity—class participation also means

engaging with the texts and your classmates as much as your comfort level allows, and ideally, more than you thought your comfort level could allow.

- *Class participation counts for 15% of your grade.*

SAILS Survey:

Our class will be participating in a new survey designed to measure the information literacy skills of incoming freshman. Oberlin's participation in this project is part of a larger nation-wide effort to better understand the kinds of information literacy skills students bring with them to college, to find ways to improve these skills, and to share this information with faculty and other administrators in order to increase our ability to teach information literacy. Your participation in this survey is integral—and is incorporated into an assignment designed to help us increase your information literacy skills. You'll receive a hand-out about the SAILS survey, our participation in it, and the assignment attached to it, as the semester begins.

Oberlin Honor Code:

All work in the class (including, but not limited to, papers, exams, quizzes, and presentations), whether graded or ungraded, is subject to the Oberlin Honor Code. For the full text of the Oberlin Honor Code, direct your web browser to this address:

www.oberlin.edu/students/student_pages/honor_code.html

Remember to write the Honor Pledge and sign your name at the end of each assignment or paper submitted for credit. The Honor Pledge states: "I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment."

If you have questions about the Honor Code, don't hesitate to ask! If you don't know whether you're violating the Honor Code, *always ask*—don't let a simple mistake or misunderstanding jeopardize your grade in the class, or even worse, your record as a student at Oberlin.

Course Goals:

Critical Reading Skills:

One of the primary goals of this course will be to improve the way you read and interpret texts (whether these texts be novels, plays, films, newspaper articles, essays, etc.). You'll be learning and practicing the skill of "close-reading," and using that skill to think through your responses and reactions to the texts we encounter. The ability to read critically demands that you learn to distinguish between *what the text says* and *how the text says it*. We'll be discussing this difference, along with critical reading concepts and close-reading techniques, throughout the semester, but most intensely during the first few weeks of class.

Critical Writing Skills:

In conjunction with developing your critical reading skills, we'll also be working to improve your ability to write critical papers. As you'll quickly discover, close-reading and critical writing go hand-in-hand; in order to come up with strong arguments for papers you'll need to have strong supporting evidence and clear textual analysis. You'll be learning not only what makes an argument an argument—as opposed to an opinion, a judgment, or a summary—but more importantly, how to arrive at a strong argument through critical reading and writing skills.

Information Literacy:

A third, but related, goal of the course is to improve your ability to find, sift through, organize, synthesize, and cite information. There are many, many ways to use the library's vast resources to improve critical writing and reading skills—one goal of this course is to help discover how *you* might use those resources for the best and most useful results. We'll be visiting the library at least once, and many of the assignments and the final two papers will incorporate research at varying levels.

Exploring "Los Angeles":

Finally, the fourth goal of the course is to explore the idea of Los Angeles as a site of incredible, and incredibly diverse, cultural production. While many of the texts we're reading are literary in nature, most (if not all) of them have some relationship to history and "real world" events, even if that relation be quite tenuous. We'll use these texts as a jumping-off point to learn about other efforts (filmic, dramatic, ecological, architectural) to contextualize and understand Los Angeles, eventually using your own interests and passions as a point of departure for the final research paper. In the process, we'll introduce concepts of both interdisciplinary study and *intra*-disciplinary study, and begin to build a productive relationship between the two.

Schedule:

DATE	CLASS SCHEDULE	WHAT'S DUE
Sept. 2	Introduction. Review of syllabus, discussion of course requirements and policies.	
Sept. 7	What do you think about when you think about L.A.?	(Assignment 1)
Sept. 9	SAILS presentation by Jessica Grim <i>Ask the Dust</i> (have read at least the first half) John Fante: Some background and history	Fante (Assignment 2)
Sept. 14	<i>Ask the Dust</i> (have completed the book) Close-reading workshop: Basics	
Sept. 16	<i>Ask the Dust</i> Close-reading workshop, part 2: Observations and Inferences	Fante (Assignment 3)
Sept. 21	<i>Ask the Dust</i> Readings: Jackson, on reserve Close-reading workshop, part 3: Argumentation	
Sept. 23	SAILS Discussion	SAILS Assignment
Sept. 28	Peer-editing day	Paper 1 Draft
Sept. 30	<i>L.A. Confidential</i> (have read at least the first half) Noir, crime, and cops: Some background and history	
Oct. 5	<i>L.A. Confidential</i>	
Oct. 7	<i>L.A. Confidential</i> (have completed the book)	Paper 1 Final
Oct. 12	<i>L.A. Confidential</i> Comparing the movie and the film	
Oct.	Session on information literacy	Ellroy (Assignment 4)

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Oct. 19	NO CLASS: Fall Recess Readings: McWilliams, on reserve	
Oct. 21	NO CLASS: Fall Recess Readings: McWilliams, on reserve	
Oct. 26	<i>Zoot Suit</i> (have completed the play) Valdez and the Zoot Suit Riots: Some background and history	Valdez (Assignment 5)
Oct. 28	<i>Zoot Suit</i>	
Nov. 2	<i>Zoot Suit</i> Comparative readings: How? Why? Class workshop	Ellroy/Valdez (6)
Nov. 4	<i>Zoot Suit</i> and <i>L.A. Confidential</i> Reading between texts and genres	
Nov. 9	Peer-editing day	Paper 2 Draft
Nov. 11	<i>Play It As It Lays</i> (have read at least the first half) "Postmodern" L.A.: Some background and history	Didion (7)
Nov. 16	<i>Play It As It Lays</i> (have completed the book) Readings: Didion, on reserve	
Nov. 18	<i>Play It As It Lays</i> Readings: Didion, on reserve	Paper 2 Final
Nov. 23	<i>Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992</i> (have read the first third) The riotous history of L.A.: Some background	
Nov. 25	NO CLASS: Thanksgiving Break <i>Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992</i>	
Nov. 30	<i>Twilight: Los Angeles</i> (have completed the book) Readings: Martinez, on reserve	Smith (8)
Dec. 2	<i>Twilight: Los Angeles</i>	Research Outline Due
Dec. 7	Readings: Davis, on reserve	
Dec. 9	Readings: Reisner, on reserve	
Dec. 14	Conclusion: What do you think about when you think about L.A.?	Final Paper Due