

**ENGLISH 414**  
**LITERATURE OF PLACE:**  
**THE CULTURAL AND MATERIAL LANDSCAPES OF THE NEW URBAN WEST**  
**FALL 2006**

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Location: 1-132 Wilson Hall  
Time: MWF 15:10-16:00  
Office: 2-270 Wilson Hall  
Office Hours: MW 14:00-15:00; 16:00-17:00

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course will explore how different kinds of places influence the people and societies that inhabit them. Its central guiding assumption is that **places—and the stories that people tell about them—play a significant role in how individuals and communities confront their deepest existential predicaments.** The spatial concepts, practices, and environments that establish our sense of place also shape how we understand such core values as the self, family, community, nation, and religion. It is in the natural beauty of wilderness landscapes, the complex socio-spatial architecture of homes and churches, the contested geo-political borderlands between nation-states, and the industrial and postindustrial transformations of urban landscapes, where modern civilizations have worked out—and continue to work out—many of their most pressing conflicts. Places and the stories that people tell about them are politically charged sites where we encounter the fundamental tensions of a society.

In addition, this course will also explore how **literature helps people navigate the socio-spatial geography of the places that they inhabit.** We will read the texts assigned for this course as examples of what we can call a critical spatial discourse, focusing specifically on how these texts represent, analyze, and imagine alternatives to various kinds of material environments and spatial practices. Using cultural representations of several kinds of places as a theoretical lens, we will examine how different people construct different senses of place. In this course, we will use cultural texts as a kind of psychoanalytic couch where we can uncover, explore, and analyze the deeper meanings of modern civilization's spatial unconscious.

More specifically, this course will focus on the cultural and material landscapes of the New Urban West. In his seminal theory of the American West, "The Frontier Hypothesis," Frederick Jackson Turner argued that "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character." **While the American West has traditionally been understood as this kind of frontier, how has the nature and function of the American West changed as it has become urbanized? How is the New Urban West different from the Old Frontier West, and how will this urbanization of the West change its cultural values and practices?** Does the New Urban West still function as a frontier, or has urbanization ended or radically altered its role as a frontier? And if the western frontier is closing, then how are we to understand the New Urban West as a region and what role will this New Urban West play in shaping the character of American culture as a whole? How have writers, filmmakers, and artists working in other media responded to the evolving geography and culture of the American West?

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

**1) Papers (90%—30% each):** You will be required to write three 4-6 page papers (double-spaced, 12 pt. Times or New Times Roman font, MLA format—note: papers will not be accepted in other fonts). The papers must be turned in by the due date if you want to revise them, but they will be accepted until the last day of class without any penalty—other than losing the chance to revise them.

**2) Final Exam (10%):** The final will be an in-class, open-book, open-note exam testing your ability to summarize, synthesize, apply, analyze, and critique the material covered in the class.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

- 1) Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2006. ISBN# 0143036386
- 2) Chandler, Raymond. *The Big Sleep*. New York: Vintage, 1998. ISBN# 0394758285
- 3) Himes, Chester. *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002. ISBN# 1560254459
- 4) Coupland, Douglas. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. ISBN# 031205436X
- 5) Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace, 1986. ISBN# 0441569595
- 6) Alexie, Sherman. *Indian Killer*. New York: Warner Books, 1998. ISBN# 0446673706
- 7) Yamashita, Karen Tei. *Tropic of Orange: A Novel*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1999. ISBN# 1566890640
- 8) Brooks, David. *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Sense*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005. ISBN# 0743227395
- 9) Davis, Mike. *Dead Cities and Other Tales*. New York: New Press, 2003. ISBN# 1565848446

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### PART I: THE NEW URBAN WEST: SUNSHINE OR NOIR?

#### Weeks 1-3: Fun in the Sun: Beach Boys and Beats

**Aug. 28:** Watch *American Graffiti*

**Aug. 30:** Watch *American Graffiti*; Brooks, Introduction and ch. 1 (1-64)

**Sept. 1:** Watch *American Graffiti*; Kerouac, I.1-7 (1-45)

**Sept. 4: Labor Day (No Class)**

**Sept. 6:** Kerouac, I.8-14 (46-108)

**Sept. 8:** Kerouac, II.1-7 (109-55)

**Sept. 11:** Kerouac, II.8-III.4 (156-206)

**Sept. 13:** Kerouac, III.5-11 (207-48)

**Sept. 15:** Kerouac, IV-V (249-307)

#### Weeks 4-6: Welcome to the Hotel California: The Dark Underside of the Urban West

**Sept. 18:** Chandler, chs. 1-9 (1-50)

**Sept. 20:** Chandler, chs. 10-16 (51-99)

**Sept. 22:** Chandler, chs. 17-22 (99-141)

**Sept. 25:** Chandler, chs. 23-27 (141-190)

**Sept. 27:** Chandler, chs. 28-32 (190-231); Davis ch. 7 (127-42)

**Sept. 29:** Himes, chs. 1-6 (1-54)

**Oct. 2:** Himes, chs. 7-11 (55-99)

**Oct. 4:** Himes, chs. 12-17 (100-149)

**Oct. 6:** Himes, chs. 18-22 (149-203); Davis ch. 3 (65-84)

### PART II: THE MCWEST AND THE APOCALYPTIC WEST:

#### POSTINDUSTRIALIZATION AND POSTMODERNISM

**Oct. 9:** Coupland, 1-60

**Oct. 11:** Coupland, 61-118

**Oct. 13:** Coupland, 119-183; Davis, ch. 2 (32-64)

**Oct. 16:** Gibson, Parts I-II (1-98)

**Oct. 18:** Gibson, Part III (99-156)

**Oct. 20:** Gibson, Part IV, chs. 13-17 (156-212)

**Oct. 23:** Gibson, Part IV and Coda, chs. 18-24 (213-71)

**Oct. 25:** Watch *Blade Runner*; Davis, Preface (1-20)

**Oct. 27:** Watch *Blade Runner*

**PART III: MINORITY REPORTS: ALTERNATE TAKES ON THE GLOBAL WEST**

**Oct. 30: First Paper Due!** Watch *Blade Runner*

**Nov. 1:** Alexie, I.1-6 (1-56); Davis, ch. 1 (23-31)

**Nov. 3:** Alexie, I. 7-13 (57-108)

**Nov. 6:** Alexie, I.14-21 (109-54)

**Nov. 8:** Alexie, II.1-11 (155-210)

**Nov. 10: Veteran's Day Holiday (no class)**

**Nov. 13:** Alexie, II.12-19 (211-60)

**Nov. 15:** Alexie, II.20-26 (261-96)

**Nov. 17:** Alexie, III.1-17 (297-366)

**Nov. 20: Second Paper Due!;** Alexie, III.18-31 (367-420)

**Nov. 22: Thanksgiving Holiday (No Class)**

**Nov. 24: Thanksgiving Holiday (No Class)**

**Nov. 27:** Yamashita (Monday and Tuesday, 1-96)

**Nov. 29:** Yamashita (Wednesday and Thursday, 97-175)

**Dec. 1:** Yamashita, (Friday and Saturday, 176-244)

**Dec. 4:** Yamashita, "Sunday" (245-70); Davis, ch. 8 (143-82)

**Dec. 6:** Brooks, chs. 7, 9 (186-212, 246-81)

**Dec. 8:** Davis, ch. 4 (85-106)

**Tues. Dec. 12 (8:00a.m-9:50 a.m.): Final Exam**

**Wed. Dec. 13 (12:00 noon): Third Paper Due (in my mailbox or by email)!**

## PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

**Paper #1: The Dialectics of the New Urban West: Sunshine or Noir?:** This paper should be a 5-7 page (double-spaced, 12 pt. Times or New Times Roman font, MLA format) analysis that compares and contrasts Kerouac's *On the Road* with **one** of the noir novels by either Chandler or Himes. In particular, this paper should **explain the two authors' different (sunshine and noir) responses to the newly emergent urban west**. What did each writer think of these new western cities, and why did they evaluate these cities so differently? What did each writer like or dislike about the urban west, its new auto-centric urban/suburban landscapes, its military-industrial political economy, its cultural values, its racial and sexual politics, etc.? How does their writing change our understanding of the American West and its culture, and what role do cities (urban spaces and urban cultures) play in their understanding of America and the American West? Do these writers believe that the West can be both urban and a frontier, and how do they resolve the tension between the old frontier west and the new urban west?

**Paper #2: The McWest and the Apocalyptic West:** This paper should be a 5-7 page (double-spaced, 12 pt. Times or New Times Roman font, MLA format) analysis of either Coupland's novel, Gibson's novel, or the film *Blade Runner*. In particular, **this paper should analyze how one of these cultural texts analyzes the physical and cultural evolution of the new urban west**. How do they see the physical landscape and political economy of the west changing? What aspects of this changing region do they find most significant, and how do they think that these changes will impact the cultural practices and cultural values of the region? What attitude do they take in response to these changes? What new novelistic techniques do they develop to represent these changes? What cultural work do these texts attempt to perform in response to these changes? Do they simply represent them, or do they attempt to analyze, critique, and imagine alternatives to them?

**Paper #3: The Global West:** This paper should be a 5-7 page (double-spaced, 12 pt. Times or New Times Roman font, MLA format) analysis of either Alexie's or Yamashita's novel. In particular, **this paper should focus on how these novels represent the cultural politics of the new urban west as a region dominated by postnational or global cities**. How do they explore issues of race, class, and/or gender in the new urban west? How does their focus on these issues alter their understanding of this region? In particular, how do they represent the new urban west less as a subregion of the American nation and more as a particular node in a much larger global economy and global culture? How does it alter our understanding of the new urban west to reframe it in a larger global context? Does this provide a more positive or more negative view of the new urban west, or both? How does globalizing the American West change our understanding of its cultural values? What new novelistic techniques do these writers develop to represent, analyze, and imagine alternatives to the global west?