COURSE DESCRIPTION:

As figures (and, lately, practices) of “difference made flesh”—as monster theorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen defines them—monsters are seemingly permanent fixtures of the human imagination. Monsters reoccur across cultures and throughout the ages, experiencing radical mutations but also preserving certain constant, organizing features and affiliations (e.g. the association between monstrosity and racial difference; or between the encounter with the monstrous and the affective experiences of fear and wonder).

But, as cultural historians of monstrosity in Latin America have argued for decades, Latin America and Latinx culture seem to have developed a special relationship to monsters and creatures. The so-called “invention of the New World” relied on the monstrous as one of its primary colors. Monsters featured prominently in the symbolic arsenal deployed by European chroniclers, scientists, and administrators in the New World. They organized discourse and legislation, underwrote cultural practices and forms of material display (e.g. the exhibition of botanical and animal specimens from the Americas in early modern cabinets of curiosities in Europe). Entire regions of Latin America were named after monsters and creatures: Patagonia after the “monstrous race” of the Patagonian giants; the Amazon rainforest after the Amazons; the Caribbean after Columbus’s rendition of the cannibal.

This course explores the colonial history of monstrosity in the New World and its modern and contemporary reinvention in the work of Latin American and Latinx artists, fiction writers, and filmmakers. The main hypothesis that guides this course is that, in Latin American and Latinx culture, monsters and creatures become a testing ground or laboratory space where the boundaries between “the human” and its other or shadow—i.e. the non-human, the sub-human, the animal—are constantly drawn and redrawn, imagined and re-imagined, revised and radicalized.

Against this background, we look at the many ways in which Latin American and Latinx artists reclaim and reinvent the history of monstrosity in the Americas from multiple angles and through various media forms, and go on to propose “new teratologies” that engage with the longstanding presence and dizzying plasticity of monsters. For these purposes, we sample and a wide spectrum of monsters and creatures—from Amazons and cannibals to zombies, cyborgs and beyond—across a range of media forms (literature, cinema, performance art, bioart) and historical periods.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. Class Participation and Attendance (20%): Class participation + active engagement with your classmates’ biweekly posts and transcreative pieces.
2. Group-Lead Close Reading (10%). On a rotating basis, groups formed in the first week will zero in on a specific formal or thematic element of one of the artworks assigned and offer the class as a whole creative or analytical prompt that would lead us into a discussion of the element selected.
3. Latte Posts (Pass/Fail; 10%): Brief, informal responses to readings/viewings, generally due every other week.
4. Midterm Exam (in class): (10% each)
5. Transcreative Piece (20%). A transcreative piece (an original story or artwork based on a story or artwork discussed in the course).
6. Final Paper: (30%). A final paper where students will a) conduct original research on an artwork by a Latin American or Latinx artist/relevant to the course topic, and b) place it in the context of class discussions and assigned readings/viewings.

ACCOMMODATIONS:

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me right away.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university. Citation and research assistance can be found at LTS - Library guides.

COURSE CALENDAR:

T 01/15
Introduction and Overview


Th 01/17
Jeffrey Jerome Cohen “Monster Theory”
Ruddolf Wittaker, “Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters”

T 01/22
Christopher Columbus, “Letter to Luis de Santángel”
Giorgio Agamben, The Use of Bodies (excerpt)

Th 01/24
Lorraine J. Daston and Katharine Park, Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750
[excerpt]
Nicolás Wey Gómez, The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies
(excerpts)
Daniela Bleichmar, “Seeing the World in a Room: Looking at Exotica in Early Modern Collections”

T 01/29
Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”
Aníbal Quijano & Immanuel Wallerstein, “Americanity as Concept; Or, the Americas in the Modern World System”
Persephone Braham, “The Monstrous Caribbean”

II: METAMORPHOSES OF THE MONSTROUS IN LATIN AMERICAN FICTION

Th 01/31
Jorge Luis Borges, The Book of Imaginary Beings (excerpts)

T 02/05
The Book of Imaginary Beings (excerpts)
Floyd Merrell, “Borges: Post- or Transhuman?”
Stefan Herbrechter & Ivan Callus, “Did Somebody Say Cy-Borges?”

Th 02/07
Pedro Cabiya, Wicked Weeds

T 02/12
Wicked Weeds
Mimi Sheller, Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies

Th 02/14
First Partial Exam

T 02/26
Martin Felipe Castagnet, Bodies of Summer
Giorgio Agamben, The Use of Bodies (excerpt)

Th 02/28
Bodies of Summer
III: MONSTERS AND CREATURES IN LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINX CINEMA AND MULTIMEDIA ART

Th 03/07
Guillermo del Toro, Dir., Cronos
Guillermo del Toro, Cabinet of Curiosities (excerpts)

T 03/12
Guillermo del Toro, Dir., The Shape of Water
Glenn Ward, “‘There is No Such Thing’: Del Toro’s Metafictional Monster Rally”

Th 03/14
Amat Escalante, Dir., La región salvaje
Persephone Braham, From Amazons to Zombies: Monsters in Latin America (excerpts)

T 03/19
Guillermo Gómez-Peña, El Naftazteca : Cyber-Aztec TV for 2000 AD
Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “Ethno-Cyborgs and Genetically Engineered Mexicans”

Th 03/21
Guillermo Gómez Peña, The Mexterminator
Lisa Rivera, “Los atravesados: Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s Ethno-Cyborgs”

T 03/26
George A. Romero, Dir., Dawn of the Dead

IV: FROM FIGURES TO PRACTICES: REMAKING MONSTERS IN LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINX BIOART

03/28
Robert Stybio, Dir., BioArt: Art From the Laboratory
Eugene Thacker, Biomedia (excerpt)

T 04/02
Robert Mitchell, Dir., Bioart and Speciation
William Meyers, BioArt: Altered Realities

Th 04/04
Edith Medina, Microgeographies; Controlled Decomposition
Eduardo Kac, GFP Bunny
Robert Mitchell, Bioart and the Vitality of Media (excerpt)
Eduardo Kac, *Natural History of the Enigma*

**Th 04/11**
Walter Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of Decoloniality”

**T 04/16**
Second Partial Exam

**T 04/30**
Conclusions and Review