MONSTERS AND CREATURES IN LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINX CULTURE

T Th 2-3:20 p.m.
Prof. Jerónimo Arellano
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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 curiosity, wonder, and fear).

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

This course explores this history of monstrosity that is particular to 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 and creative laboratory where the boundaries between Western conceptions of “the human” and its other or its shadow—i.e. the non-Western “non-human,” the sub- or infra-human, as well as animal or botanical species—are drawn and redrawn, imagined and re-imagined, reversed and radicalized.

Against this background, we look at the many ways in which Latin American and Latinx artists reclaim and reinvent the long history of monstrosity in the Americas from multiple vantages and through various media forms, proposing “new teratologies” that engage with the
dizzying plasticity and imaginative pleasures and horrors of the monstrous and the creaturely. For these purposes, we sample and a wide spectrum of monsters and creatures in Latin/x America—from Amazons and cannibals to zombies, cyborgs and beyond—across a range of media forms (literature, cinema, video and performance art, bioart) and various historical periods.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

Students taking this course should expect to acquire a) a broad view of the long cultural history of monstrosity in Latin America in some of its most salient manifestations; b) critical awareness of how a nearly omnipresent figure in global popular culture has been used by Latin American and Latinx artists to foster projects of decolonial and epistemic/affective disobedience; and c) an understanding of how new technologies—e.g. genomics and biotechnology—as well as new media forms—e.g. biomedia—have radically transfigured both the boundaries of the monstrous and their aesthetic potential in the contemporary age.

Students should also expect to acquire a basic working knowledge of what is known as “the coloniality/modernity paradigm,” one of the most important schools of thought to have come out of Latin America in recent decades. This paradigm develops an Americanist critique of Western forms of capitalist modernity and rationality, perceived from this point of view as systems grounded in forms of racial and socioenomic inequality developed first in the Atlantic contact zone of the early Americas. In this course, we will draw on a basic overview of this paradigm to interrogate the history of monstrosity and its remaking in the work of the Latin American and Latinx artists featured in this course.

Students in this class will also have ample opportunity to dream up monster stories and creaturely art of their own, for the fun of it as well as with the goal of engaging with particular issues and questions raised by this course.

**COURSE MATERIALS:**

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*
Martín Felipe Castagnet, *Bodies of Summer*

* All other materials available on LATTE

**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. Two partial Exams (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).
7. Final Paper or Transcreative piece: (20%). A final analytical paper where students conduct original research on an artwork by a Latin American or Latinx artist directly relevant to the course topic but not discussed in this class and place it in the context of class discussions and assigned readings/viewings; or create a more substantial transcreative piece accompanied by a critical introduction and commentary.

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 as soon as possible.

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.

GRADING SCALE:

98 -100 = A+ 78 - 79 = C+ 59 and below = F
94 - 97 = A 74 - 77 = C
90 - 93 = A- 70 - 73 = C-
88 - 89 = B+ 68 - 69 = D+
84 - 87 = B 64 - 67 = D
80 - 83 = B- 60 - 63 = D-

• To allow us to focus on the readings/viewings and the work created by students in this class, please print out all of the readings posted on latte and your classmates’ written assignments and bring them to class. Unless needed for a specific in-class activity, laptops and cell-phones are not to be used in the class.
• Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class.
 COURSE CALENDAR:

T 01/15
Introduction and Overview


T 01/22
Jeffrey Jerome Cohen “Monster Theory”
Rudolf Wittaker, “Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters”
Christopher Columbus, “Letter to Luis de Santángel”
Veronica Austen, “The Value of Creative Writing Assignments in English Lit. Courses”

Th 01/24
Peter C. Mancall, “Collecting Americans”

T 01/29
Nicolás Wey Gómez, “Introduction,” The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies
Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”
Aníbal Quijano & Immanuel Wallerstein, “Americanity as Concept; Or, the Americas in the Modern World System”

II: METAMORPHOSES OF THE MONSTROUS IN LATIN AMERICAN FICTION

Th 01/31
Jorge Luis Borges, The Book of Imaginary Beings (excerpts)
Persephone Braham, “The Monstrous Caribbean”

T 02/05
Pedro Cabiya, Wicked Weeds: A Zombie Novel (1-64)

Th 02/07
Pedro Cabiya, Wicked Weeds (64-104)

T 02/12
Wicked Weeds
Th 02/14
First Partial Exam

T 02/26
Alejandro Brugués, Dir., Juan of the Dead
Mimi Sheller, Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies

Th 02/28
Martín Felipe Castagnet, Bodies of Summer

T 03/05
Bodies of Summer

Th 03/07
Bodies of Summer
Stefan Herbrechter & Ivan Callus, “Did Somebody Say Cy-Borges?”

III: MONSTERS AND CREATURES IN LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINX CINEMA AND MULTIMEDIA ART

T 03/12
Guillermo del Toro, Dir., Cronos
Guillermo del Toro, Cabinet of Curiosities (excerpts)

Th 03/14
Guillermo del Toro, Dir., The Shape of Water
Glenn Ward, “‘There is No Such Thing’: Del Toro’s Metafictional Monster Rally”

T 03/19
Amat Escalante, Dir., The Untamed
Persephone Braham, From Amazons to Zombies: Monsters in Latin America (excerpt)

Th 03/21
Guillermo Gómez-Peña, El Naftazteca: Cyber-Aztec TV for 2000 AD
Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “Ethno-Cyborks and Genetically Engineered Mexicans”

T 03/26
Guillermo Gómez Peña, The Mexterminator
Lisa Rivera, “Los atravesados: Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s Ethno-Cyborks”

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)

T 04/09
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
George A. Romero, *Dawn of the Dead*
Conclusions and Review