

Gods, Ghosts, and Monsters: On-Line Course

Summer, 2022

Instructor: Justin McDaniel

Online office hours: Wednesdays 8-10 pm

Introduction

This course seeks to be a broad introduction. It introduces students to the diversity of doctrines held and practices performed, and art produced about “the fantastic” from earliest times to the present. The fantastic (the uncanny or supernatural) is a fundamental category in the scholarly study of religion, art, anthropology, and literature. This course will focus both theoretical approaches to studying supernatural beings from a Religious Studies perspective while drawing examples from Buddhist, Shinto, Christian, Afro-Caribbean, Hindu, Jain, Zoroastrian, Egyptian, Central Asian, and Native American sources from earliest examples to the present including mural, image, manuscript, film, codex, and even comic book. It will also introduce students to related humanistic categories of study: material and visual culture, theodicy, cosmology, shamanism, transcendentalism, soteriology, eschatology, phantasmagoria, spiritualism, mysticism, theophany, and the historical power of rumor. It will serve as a gateway course into the study of Religion among numerous other fields including Africana, South Asian, and East Asian Studies, as well as Visual Culture and Film Studies. It will include guest lectures from professors from several departments, as well as opportunities for hands-on use of the collections of the Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the manuscripts held in the Schoenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Collection of Van Pelt Library. It aims to not only introduce students to major themes, approaches, and terms in the study of religion and the supernatural, but inspire them to take more advanced courses by Liliane Weissberg, Projit Mukharji, Talya Fishman, David Barnes, Jolyon Thomas, Megan Robb, Donovan Schaeffer, Jamal Elias, David Spafford, Frank Chance, Michael Meister, Paul Goldin, Renata Holod, Paul Rozin, Anthea Butler, among several others.

Objectives

- To provide an opportunity for students to improve writing and critical thinking skills;
- To introduce students to major themes and terms in the scholarly study of religion;
- To encourage the comparative study of religion while emphasizing the importance of studying individual religious traditions in their own historical, cultural, linguistic, social and geographic context.

Requirements

This course will be a mixture between synchronous and asynchronous activities. Synchronous means interacting in “real-time” with other students and the instructor through the on-line videoconferencing. Attendance at these sessions is required. Asynchronous means watching the video lectures, field trips, films, and interviews and providing comments and questions on your own time in the course site in Canvas. There will also be asynchronous chances to communicate with the instructor one on one each week. The asynchronous time will be approximately 6 hours per week.

- (1) Participation in weekly synchronous videoconferencing sessions/discussions (20% of final grade). Active, engaged participation in class discussions through synchronous chats & verbal discussion. Your grade will be based on regular attendance and the quality of your comments in class discussion. You need to demonstrate that you have completed class readings & read them critically. There will be 1 hour of synchronous meetings per week.
- (2) Final examination (10% of final grade). This will be a synchronous final exam monitored by a remote proctor that will last one hour in which each student will have to identify 10 terms and describe them briefly and write one short essay. There will be an examine preparation guide provided. The final exam will be based on material in video lectures, interviews, and field trips. It will not be based on the reading.
- (3) Critical book responses (30% of the final grade). There will be three papers 5-6 pages each in this course (each worth 10%). Each will be on a specific book and respond to a specific prompt for each book. There will be five total paper assignments, but you only have to hand-in three papers to get full credit. If you would like to write four or even five papers, you will get significant extra credit. Please ask your instructor about this extra credit if you would like to write more than three papers.
- (4) “Cool things I found” (20% of your final grade). In a subject like Gods, Ghosts, and Monsters, students often start to conduct independent internet and library research based on the lectures, readings, and discussions. In the course of this research I have found that students often find interesting websites, documentaries, videos, photographs, stories, etc. Each student is asked to share with the class one interesting item a week that they would like to present and have other people comment on. These items will be posted in the class Canvas page. I have found in the past that some of the best class discussions come out of these student generated posts.
- (5) Responses to Video Interviews, Video Lectures, and Video Fieldtrips (20% of final grade). After watching each film, video interview, video lecture, and video field trip (each student should respond to a minimum of 10 total videos), students must post at least one question and one comment. They also must respond to at least one question or comment from other students. Questions and comments are due on Monday (5 pm EST) and responses are due by Wednesday (5 pm EST) of each week of the course. .

Note: absolutely no assignment will be accepted late without prior approval (which will only be given in cases of officially documented medical or family emergency). I mean this.

Books

Stephen Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yôkai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009)

Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

Bader, Baker, and Mencken, *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

Schedule

Section I:

Did you feel that?: An Introduction to the Study of the Fantastic in the Study of Religion, Art, and Literature

Modules one and two:

Defining the Fantastic in Religious Studies

- The Fantastic
- The Supernatural
- Theophany
- Soteriology and Eschatology
- Hierophany
- Theodicy and Evil

Utopias and Felicities: The Worlds of the Divine on Earth and in other Realms

- Cosmologies and Pantheons
- Polytheism

- Monotheism and Monism
- Animism
- Sacred Mountains and Holy Rivers
- Paradises, Purelands, and Heavens

Hellscape: The Denizens and the Depths of the Netherworlds

- Guardians and Guides
- Levels and Gates
- Temporary visitors and permanent residents
- Hell on Earth

*Video interview with Prof. Annette Yoshiko Reed (Specialist in Demons and Hells in the Ancient Near East)

*Video Fieldtrip to the Mayan Section of the Penn Museum

*First Paper due on June 11th at 5 pm EST (see instructions below)

Modules three and four:

Spectres in our Midst

- Avatars
- Saints
- Angels
- Ancestors

In-Between Things

- Hybrid Animals and Hybrid Humans
- Cyborgs and Hermaphrodites
- Viscera Suckers and Vampires
- Giants, Trolls, Goblins, Beasts
- Zombies and Animated Corpses

*Film: Invisible Worlds of Icelandic Trolls, Fairies, and the like...

*Video lectures by Peter Struck (Specialist in Ghosts, Demons, and Monsters of Greece)

*Note: second paper due on June 25th at 5 pm EST (see below)

Section II:

They walk among us: thinking about how we study the best and worst angels of (our) nature

Modules Five and Six:

Psychological Approaches to the Study of Supernatural

Bio-Genetic and Neuro-scientific Approaches to the Study of the Supernatural

Social and Economic Approaches to the Study of the Supernatural

*Video Field Trip to Woodland Cemetery

*Video Field Trip to the Wagner Free Institute of Science

*Note: third paper due on July 9th at 5 pm EST (see below)

Modules Seven and Eight:

Theological and Experiential Approaches to the Study of the Supernatural

Discursive and History of Science Approaches

*Video Field Trip to the Mutter Museum Library of Rare Teratology Manuscripts and Medical Monsters

*Note: Fourth paper due on July 23rd at 5 pm EST (see below)

Section III:

Take my hand and repeat after me: Accessing the supernatural

Modules Nine and Ten:*Reaching the Beyond*

- Healing
- Spiritualism
- Mediumship
- Witchcraft
- Dance and Trance
- Exorcism
- Shamanism

Quieting the Mind

- Meditation
- Prayer
- Transcendentalism
- Visualization and Visions
- Tantra

Living Statues

- Amulets, Talismans, Tattoos, and Takrut
- The Lives of Images and Relics
- Darshan

*Video Interview with Prof. David Yaden (Specialist in the history of mysticism)

*Note: Fifth Paper Due on August 6th at 5 pm EST (see below)

Section IV:

Painting stone eyes: Art, Material, and Visual Culture of the Supernatural

Module Eleven:

Two-dimensional Monsters

- Decorative Art, Manuscripts, and Drolleries
- Beastiaries and Manuals
- Horror Films, Anime, and Comic Books

*Film: Nang Nak

**Final Examination (August 6th)

Paper Assignments

Each paper should be 5-6 pages long/double-spaced/11 point Times New Roman Font). Each student must complete 3 of the 5 papers. If you receive a lower grade than you like on one of the three papers, you can do an additional paper to replace that grade.

1) Stephen Asma sees our deepest fears in monsters as rooted in our biology. Our fear of deepsea monsters, hybrid animals, cyborgs, giants, and creepy-crawly-slithery things as an evolutionary advantage developed over thousands of years. However, he also demonstrates that we are not only afraid of monsters, but are curious about them and fascinated by them. There is something about the uncanny, the fantastic, the unexplainable, and even the evil that attracts us and leads to the creation of art, myths, ritual, and films. How can monsters be both psychologically horrifying, biologically protective, and intellectually stimulating? Define Asma's argument/thesis. Describe 4-5 pieces of evidence that he uses to support that argument/thesis. Then offer your own counter-argument using 2-3 other pieces of evidence in his book. To help establish your counter-argument ask yourself? Is fear an evolutionary advantage? Do we create monsters out of need or entertainment? Are there differences between religious and non-religious monsters? Are there differences between natural and supernatural creatures (a spider versus a manticore or a snake versus a cyborg for example)? Does Asma's creative use of evidence actually weaken his ability to create firm categories/taxonomies of monsters? Are all monsters related?

2) Elizabeth Pérez's study of Afro-Caribbean religions in Chicago is a ground-breaking ethnographic study of the ways in religious traditions persist, change, and adapt among diaspora communities. By looking closely at the overlooked spaces of women and cooking, she is able to see how people are socialized into Santeria and Lucumí practices involving goddesses and gods of West African and Cuban spirituality. She argues that these intimate and highly gendered

spaces are where religious and cultural expectations and ethical affordances are internalized. In your paper, identify Pérez's argument and the theoretical models she employs. After that, formulate your own counter-argument that interrogates her approaches, the ethics of her anthropological work, and her findings. How can you reinterpret her findings?

- 3) Bader, Baker, and Mecken's book on Paranormal experiences and beliefs in the United States tries to balance anaecdotal and reported evidence of encounters with aliens, cryptozoological creatures, ghosts, and other manifestations of the paranormal in American history with a sociological approach to "why" Americans hold and spread these beliefs. In this paper, explain their sociological approach and provide at least three examples from the book on how they support this argument. Then, answer and support these questions: What is missing in their study? What approaches that we reviewed in this course perhaps could have strengthened or diversified their findings? How would you explain the widespread belief and practice of the paranormal?
- 4) Michael Dylan Foster's study of Japanese yōkai (monsters and ghosts of various sorts) takes a political, cultural, and economic approach. However, he states that the presence of "weird" or "unknowable" "things" (mono-no-ke) in Japanese mythology and religion can't be reduced to any simple economic or political cause. Indeed, his book participates in many different "discourses" (pg. 3). However, then he embeds his study of yōkai in four distinct historical moments ranging from the 1660s to modern manga and anime culture in Japan. Is this paper, summarize Foster's argument and show how he supports it drawing on evidence from two different "moments." Then argue whether ghosts, monsters, and other "weird things" can be explained by historical (economic, social, political) causes. In formulating your own argument, ask yourself: are monsters and the reason humans believe in them unknowable? Or are they perfectly explainable if we have a good knowledge of the historical context from which they arise? Is there something unique about certain moments in Japanese history that led to the belief in certain distinctly Japanese "weird things"? Are all monsters, ghosts, and gods historical and culturally specific or are their human universal beliefs and ways of expressing those beliefs? If Japanese weird things are specific to Japanese history, then why are they so popular with people all over the world? Alternatively, if Dracula or Frankenstein or Golem or the Virgin Mary are specific to Western history, religion, and culture, why are they now popular stories in Japan and other non-Western cultures?
- 5) McDaniel's book, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, looks at the figures of Somdet To, a well-known monk and ghost-tamer, and Mae Nak, a famous ghost. He argues that instead of seeing magic and ghost belief as somehow non-Buddhist or esoteric, it is a mainstream part of modern Buddhism in Thailand. After briefly summarizing the book, develop your own argument that criticizes McDaniel's approach. To help formulate your criticism ask yourself? Does his approach to "magic" make sense? Is magic a useful or derogatory term for practices that Buddhist use to protect against spirits, ghosts, disease, and danger? Are Thai Buddhists betraying Buddhist ideals of non-attachment and compassion by undertaking magical practices to

protect against ghosts? Does his “repertoire” argument make sense? What would be a more useful way of understanding the tension between Buddhist values and the practice of magic?

Further Readings if you have time (not required)

Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973)

Lucy Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Arnold, 1996)

Alice Kehoe, *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking* (Waveland, 2000). Marina Warner, *Monsters of our own Making* (U. Kentucky Press, 2007)

Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (U. California Press, 2000)

Alice Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* (U.Toronto, 2002). David Morgan, *Visual Culture of American Religions* (U.California Press, 2001).

Elaine Breslaw, *Witches of the Atlantic World: An Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook* (NYU Press, 2000). Janet Lee Scott, *For Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Chinese Tradition of Paper Offerings* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

Jean Allman and John Parker, *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God* (U.Indiana Press, 2005).

Xiaofei Kang, *The Cult of the Fox* (New York: Columba University Press, 2006).

Michelle Osterfeld Li, *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Bryan Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld: Buddhist Popular Narratives of Death and the Afterlife in Tibet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.