

LT268 Theories of the Body

Seminar Leader: Clio Nicastro

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Course Times: Tuesday & Thursday 9:00-10:30

Room:

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

Our body has always attracted the interest of thinkers and researchers from different cultures and from a wide range of academic disciplines, from philosophy to critical theory to psychoanalysis and neuroscience. One of the crucial challenges since the enlightenment has been to reflect on and try to overcome the supposed dichotomy between mind and body, reason and feeling, from Descartes on. How can we explore the anxiety for a fluid idea of our body affected by changes and transformation? Is there such a thing as a ‘natural’ body or are the experiences of our bodies always constructed by class, race, gender, and our personal stories? How are our bodies influenced by our narratives and by those images beyond our immediate control, in social media, TV, films?

This course approaches the body as an unstable, fluid, and historically contingent site, shaped by processes of change and transformation. It critically examines the notion of a “natural” body, questioning whether bodily experience can ever be unmediated or universal. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework, the course explores how bodies are constructed through class, race, gender, sexuality, environmental relations, and personal histories, as well as through practices of transformative routine (*askesis*), scientific and technological developments, and forms of political domination.

Special attention is given to the narratives and images that shape our embodied experiences beyond our immediate control, including those circulating through social media, television, film, and contemporary visual culture. In a political and social moment marked by insistence on bodily boundaries, regulation, and control—and in which the body has become a focal point of both care and hostility—the course invites students to critically reflect on meanings and limits of embodiment today. By tracing how fantasies, discourses, and practices that define bodily boundaries have shifted historically, the course provides theoretical tools to analyze the ongoing production of subjectivity (especially reflecting on “Autotheory”) and to imagine alternative ways of thinking about bodies, power, and agency.

Requirements

Preparing for class involves reading thoughtfully and engaging with the set text for each class, for instance, by thinking through the argument of a particular section and taking notes while reading. Try to formulate and address questions before you come to class: What is the argument being made by the author? What terms recur throughout the text? How does it relate to other texts we have read on the course? If you find a particular section difficult to understand underline unfamiliar terms and try to ask yourself what specifically is unclear (don’t worry if you find the texts difficult or if you are not

familiar with all the references; remember it is always possible that the author is being unclear or contradictory).

Students are expected to participate actively in class. The purpose of the class is to come to a better understanding of it through collective discussion. Students are therefore encouraged to ask questions as well as making statements in class. The texts will be uploaded every week on google classroom. Students are asked to bring paper copies of the reading to class and to not use laptops. The use of electronic devices during class time is only allowed for disability accommodation. If you have a disability accommodation, please inform your instructor at the beginning of the course.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from students in their studies. Syllabi should note that, instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Regular attendance and active participation are essential to the success of this course. Attendance at ALL classes is expected. Late arrival or leaving during class time will count as an absence. Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assessment

The assessment will be made on the basis of two essays and class participation (See 'Grade Breakdown' and 'Essay Deadlines' below).

Assignments

The deadlines for all writing assignments can be found under 'Essay deadlines.' The midterm assignment will be an in-class exam in which students will engage with a thematic question reflecting their understanding of one aspect of the readings discussed during the first part of the course. The final assignment will be a take-home essay (3,000 words), which is expected to be more ambitious in scope, developing a comprehensive analysis of a specific conceptual question or topic encountered during the course and drawing on a wider range of sources.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Classroom participation: 30%

Midterm Essay: 30%

Final Essay: 40%

Schedule

Week 1 Introduction

Tuesday, January 27: Introduction to the course/Presentation of the syllabus.

Jayna Brown, *Body*, in “Keywords for African American Studies”, ed. by R. Edwards et al. (2018) + Canning, Kathleen, *The body as method? Reflections on the place of the body in gender history* (1999)

Thursday, January 29: Excerpt from Willemijn Ruberg, *History of the Body* (2019) + Roy Porter, *History of the Body* (1991)

Week 2 Is History of the Body possible?

Tuesday, February 3: René Descartes, *First Meditation* + *Second Meditation* in “Meditations on First Philosophy” (1641)

Thursday, February 5: René Descartes, *Meditations* + Excerpt from Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (1987)

Week 3 Is History of the Body possible?

Tuesday February 10: Excerpt from Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1978)

Thursday, February 12: Excerpt from Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1978)

Week 4 Body capital

Tuesday, February 17: Excerpt from Barbara Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin* (1991)

Thursday, February 19: Excerpt from Silvia Federici, *Caliban and The Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004)

Week 5 Body capital

Tuesday, February 24: Excerpt from Silvia Federici, *Caliban and The Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004)

Thursday, February 26: Excerpt from Lea Melandri, *Love and Violence: The Vexatious Factor of Civilization* (1987)

Week 6 Projecting Violence

Tuesday, March 3: Excerpt from Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (1987)

Thursday, March 5: Excerpt from Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (1987)

Week 7 Racialized Bodies

Tuesday, March 10: Excerpt from Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America* (1997)

Thursday, March 12: Excerpt from Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America* (1997)

Week 8 Racialized Bodies

Tuesday, March 17: Excerpt from Fanon, *Black Skin White Mask*

Thursday, March 19: Excerpt from Fanon, *Black Skin White Mask*

Week 9 Bodily Borders

Tuesday, March 24: Julia Kristeva, *On Abjection* (1980)

Thursday, March 26: In-class exam

Spring Break (Mon, March 30, 2026 - Mon, April 6, 2026)

Week 10 Bodily Borders and eating disorders

Tuesday, April 7: Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993)

Thursday, April 9: Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (1987).

Week 11 Bodily Borders and eating disorders

Tuesday, April 14: Excerpt from Alessandra Lemma, *Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic Study of Body Modification* (2010) + Excerpt from Sander L. Gilman "Making the Body Beautiful" (1999)

Thursday, April 16: Film screening + discussion: Johannes Büttner, Julian Vogel *Soldiers of Light* (2025)

Week 12 Autotheory

Tuesday, April 21: no class

Thursday, April 23: Gloria Anzaldua, Excerpt from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987)

Week 13 Autotheory

Tuesday, April 28: Gloria Anzaldua, Excerpt from *Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (2015)

Thursday, April 30: Paul Preciado, excerpt from *Testo Junkie* (2008)

Week 14 Autotheory

Tuesday, May 5: Conference ICI Institute for Cultural Inquiry on Autotheory (more details soon)

Thursday, May 7: Recap and final remarks/Review of final draft

Completion week

Mon, May 11 - Fri, May 15, 2026

Final Essay: 20th May (8pm)