

Teaching Guide

***Angels of the Americlypse*, edited by Carmen Giménez-Smith and John Chávez**

Angels of the Americlypse is a collection of contemporary Latin@ writing. While much of the writing in the anthology is politically and formally progressive, there is no dominant mode that unifies these poets and writers. On the contrary, this anthology aims to demonstrate that Latin@ writing is a varied and constantly re-emerging force that operates beyond (but also sometimes aggressively within) the parameters of genre and voice.

This guide is composed of six sections, organized by theme: Context, Form, Latin@ Writing, Aesthetics, Some Quotes, and Assignments. Every section offers a number of perspectives on *Americlypse* related to its theme (except for Context, which serves as a supplement to the editors' introduction at the beginning of the anthology). Each perspective has a title (such as "Personhood and Postmodernism), some context, and a question. Please consider these talking points and tools to help students understand the anthology.

Enjoy!

Context

Why *this* anthology with *these* writers?

The editors Carmen Giménez-Smith and John Chávez describe the project of *Angels of the Americlypse* in their introduction. The anthology is an attempt to share – or at least illuminate – the contemporary condition of Latin@ writing. However, this project is not simply a collection of strong writing, but a means of exposing the stereotypes distorting Latin American literature. To point, the editors explain that despite its innovative past and present, some readers still expect Latin@ writing to refer to outdated cultural narratives and campy sentimentality. The editors write, “Rather than sit at our drafting table as aesthetic innovators, we Latin@ poets are expected to normalize our histories and tell the ancestral tales of our colorful otherness” (XII).

So what is “colorful otherness”? What are the issues at stake in the discourse surrounding Latin@ literature? As Rigoberto González writes in his introduction to J. Michael Martínez’s selections, Latin@ literature is expected to “[reach] back to the sentimentalized past in order to present a view of the ‘old ways.’” This nostalgia for “old ways,” a nostalgia that necessitates conservative form and content instead of aesthetic experimentation, is often less a hazy memory than a concession to the conventional idea of what a Latin@ writer should do. Likewise, in erecting memorials to a cultural heritage, the future of this heritage is effectively sapped of its relevance and vitality as it avoids addressing its contemporary context. Along these lines, *Americlypse* serves to question the expectations of Latin@ literature by asking what it means to be a Latin@ writer in the 21st Century and how Latin@ writers will navigate their personal, political, aesthetic, and creative histories.

The editors make an effective comparison of Latin@ writing to Asian American writing (and specifically, the Asian American literature anthology *Charlie Chan is Dead*) early in their introduction. But another example may help to clarify the premise of *Americlypse*. In the final poem of her selections, titled “I’m Off to Meet,” Cecilia Vicuña inverts the traditional association of the moon with femininity (in which Woman passively responds to the stations of the moon in the sky) by asking whether it is actually women who control the moon, not vice versa:

I turn phosphorescent
and show the moon the way

Does she bring on menstruation
or do the ovaries cause her to rotate
every 28 days? (322)

Instead of simply deferring to the canonical association of the moon with the female, Vicuña complicates her poem by rearranging the power positions – making the female an active participant in the cosmos. Without dwelling further (the poem is much more interesting than this simplified reading), it is easy to see how Vicuña references a theme (femininity) and challenges its traditional representations. This process of simultaneous reference and challenge in relation to traditional thematic content is one of the few aesthetic values shared by all the writers in *Americlypse*.

That said, perhaps the most important thing to remember about *Americlypse* is that the book is a discussion. The New Latin@ Writing it anthologizes is far ranging, from work in hybrid genres to relatively traditional romantic poetry to plays. Every author in *Americlypse* has their counterpoint in another who writes in a different form with unique aesthetic pursuits. These authors do not agree on a specific direction for Latin@ writing – happily, there are differences and disagreements from one author to the next. Keep this in mind as you read their work.

Form

The Anthology Format

Context:

The anthology format is a very popular method of sharing literature. There are hundreds of anthologies produced every year, mostly with the intent to deliver literature into the hands of students so that they can develop a better grasp of the canon. Consequently, anthologies are typically concise and easy to use in addition to supplying an air of importance and finality to the collected work. So in a limited way, *Americlypse* is a just another anthology of interesting literature. But to return to the full title of this anthology, *Angels of the Americlypse: An Anthology of New Latin@ Writing*, reveals that there is more to the collection than the anthology form typically explores.

To begin with, the anthology is described as “new,” which brings up two significant observations: when something is “new” its cultural significance is often yet to be determined, and when something is “new” it follows that it may be “old” in the near future. By design, this anthology is neither a reflection of the consensus of mainstream cultural critics nor does it declare these writers as the *only* new Latin@ writers in America. On the contrary, *Americlypse* is peppered with experimental content, controversial themes, and references to writers, philosophers, intellectuals, and activists beyond the Latin@ context. In keeping with the aesthetics and politics at work in the collection and publication of *Americlypse*, the anthology is clearly not supposed to be conclusive, definitive, or final.

To point, the editors note that the anthology “begins to collect the parts of this evolving [Latin@] corpus,” significantly describing the book as an ephemeral *beginning* rather than a static *end*, while also reminding readers that there *is* a corpus of this work despite its relative obscurity in American literature.

Question:

In your experience, how does *Angels of the Americlypse* compare with other anthologies? Consider this in terms of the intent of the editors and the reason for collecting the work into a book.

More Than Literature: Aesthetic Statements

Context:

In *Angels of the Americlypse*, each author has an introduction, a selection of writings, and an aesthetic statement. The purpose of the introduction and the selected work is obvious: the introductions prepare the reader for the writer’s work, while the selection offers a glimpse into the creative, political, and/or personal constellation of the writer’s published material. But what about the aesthetic statements? Are they intended to illuminate the selected writings, or are they additional material in the “evolving corpus” described by the editors?

Question:

To consider the form and intent of the anthology, take a look at what Robert Lopez writes in his aesthetic statement. In flatly quotidian detail, he explains “This morning I wrote this statement. Next I will eat breakfast, most likely oatmeal” (121). How does this relatively offhand approach to the aesthetic statement – and its implied preference for the *work* of a writer rather than their aesthetic ideas – relate to the stated goals of *Americlypse* by the editors in the introduction? How does Robert Lopez’s style in his

aesthetic statement compare with other writers'? (For a different approach, take a look at Sandy Florian's aesthetic statement on page 83). Finally, how do aesthetics shape literature, and vice versa? Is *Americlypse* an aesthetic project or a political one? What is the difference?

Latin@ Writing

Marginalization

Context:

How we read and discuss Latin@ writing – i.e., the question of how Latin@ authors are received and why – is at the forefront of Smith and Chávez’s project. As with other writers from marginalized communities, “the roles of Latino writers are often conflated with those of cultural attachés, the narrative representatives of our so called minority states” (XII). Latin@ writers are expected to report themselves and their heritage, to neutralize their writing by performing for the dominating class, which often involves using a very *traditionalized* language and persona.

For some, it may be difficult to understand what a marginalized artist is. And, even further, it can be hard to distinguish between a marginalized artist and an accepted one. Going back into the introduction may provide some clarification:

...the marginalized artist is outside of or without access to the hegemonic practices that emerge from capitalist supremacy. The output of this supremacy is defined through a lens that distorts alien cultural practices, so that the monolithic stereotype for the Latin@ person elides over the complex and often contradictory experience of the Latin American U.S. citizen. (XIV)

Here, the editors explain that capitalist culture excludes “alien” perspectives – i.e., perspectives outside of, or more often *within but in disagreement with*, the ruling ideology. But these discriminated perspectives do not necessarily reflect political positions – one’s experience, too, can be dangerously alien in a hegemonic society.

Question:

What is the dominant or “hegemonic” cultural arrangement that the authors believe *Angels of Americlypse* responds to? Referring to the introduction, what other minority writers have been excluded – or compartmentalized – by this hegemonic class? How so? And what is the result?

Assimilation

Context:

One of the recurring subjects throughout *Angels of the Americlypse* is the nature of integration and assimilation for minority writers. In this regard, many of the authors conceptualize their experiences inside American culture as they create a space that is not circumscribed by racism or stereotypes. But this is not to say that *Americlypse* only traces these writers’ quest for validation from their peers. Because there are outdated and often offensive expectations for Latin@ writers to obediently explore a narrow range of themes, it is important to remember these expectations do not simply reflect the opinion of misguided literary critics. These narrow-minded opinions, as manifestations of xenophobia, may signify that American culture is slowly closing its doors to outsiders. Though America was once referred to as the “melting pot,” perhaps this cultural hub is now attempting to solidify (despite the continued influx of immigrants).

Question:

Daniel Borutzky uses the phrase “UnitedStatesian” throughout his aesthetic statement. Whereas descriptors such as French, Mexican, and Japanese tend to be used (for better or for worse) to refer to a distinct culture with a localized history, Americans rarely turn this generalizing (and localizing) lens upon themselves. With this in mind, what is “UnitedStatesian” about the United States? What is “local” to Americans, and how is that changing? Who determines what is “UnitedStatesian” and what is not? How?

Aesthetics

Heritage? Who Says?

Context:

In her poem “Durango, Durango,” Mónica de la Torre identifies a gap between her identity and her familial heritage in a letter addressed to her father: “Like you, I’m afraid of sounding trite when I talk about local flavor. Is that why I’ve got no story? There’s a big lake here that you might find attractive. You could practice your water sports while I remember the right spelling for lacunae” (255). Torre’s reference to “local flavor” highlights one of the core literary and cultural issues in *Americlypse*. On the one hand, there is the circumstance of developing an identity apart from the “local flavor” that often characterizes minority cultures. On the other, there is the difficulty of living in the shadow of “local flavor” that either misrepresents or distorts an otherwise unique personality in the eyes of others – a “local flavor” that can be used to define and defile its constituents. This deadlock, between the cultural legacy of the father and the daughter’s “[fear] of sounding trite” talking about “local flavor,” is symbolized by the “lacunae” which, significantly, the author must *remember* how to spell.

Question:

How do the writers in *Americlypse* address the deadlock described above? How do they identify with – or distance themselves from – the “local flavors” associated with their cultural experience? If a writer doesn’t want to be known as just another “local flavor” from Latin America, what are their alternatives? And how do their attempts to reconcile, transcend, or contextualize their familial heritage influence their aesthetics?

Priorities – History or Language?

Context:

There is much more to *Americlypse* than the navigation of cultural heritages. In fact, many of the writers are more concerned with the experience of personhood than they are with extinguishing stereotypes. For the authors in *Americlypse*, there seem to be at least two identities at play: the “autobioethnographic” one (as described by Norma E. Cantú on page 55) and something separate, something that doesn’t necessarily coexist with cultural and historical narratives. From this other identity, which cohabits but often contradicts the inherited “autobioethnographic” self, the author seeks freedom, knowledge, and ecstacy through language. Consider the following statements from four of the authors in *Americlypse*:

- Edwin Torres:

“I’ve never been interested in writing about my race, my culture as much as I am about being a human inhabiting this body” (292).
- Cynthia Cruz:

“Writing poetry is how I deal with the world, with not-knowing – it is for me a machine-like means by which I write what I don’t understand and by doing so, by writing around it, inside it, I come to a better understanding” (71).

- Michael Mejia:

“Writing, then, is never really a product, but a process, and a piece of writing is evidence of my passing, a trace” (168).

- elena minor:

“My work is provoked by a curiosity about the mystery, paradox, and possibilities of spaces, symbols, and juxtapositions in language. I’m taken with notions of how we construct or derive meaning with any given three-dimensional arrangement or combination of letters, symbols, spaces, and sounds” (180).

Question:

Comparing the authors’ aesthetic statements above and their selections in the anthology, consider the following:

How do these writers fit into this anthology of Latin@ literature, which collects authors who “often write for or against their familial heritages” (XV)? In what ways do these writers contribute to the project described by the editors in the introduction? Furthermore, how do their techniques and experimental exercises compare to writers outside the Latin@ context?

Heritage, Language, and Personhood in a Capitalist Culture

Context:

Describing Roberto Toscano’s work, Joshua Ware writes “the poet attempts to develop a ‘globonian,’ border-crossing citizen through the creation of an idiom that poeticizes the language of technocratic capitalism.” He continues, stating that “Toscano’s poems ‘give the reader a much needed work out in an effort to undermine the hierarchical orders created by ‘national power-blocs’ and ‘trade-pact supported inlay[s]’ via poetry.” Joshua Ware is referring to Toscano’s challenge to bureaucratic language. Here, the bureaucratic idiom, “the language of technocratic capitalism,” neutralizes speech not only through bland pat phrases but also by downplaying the importance of identity and subjectivity in communication. Many other writers in *Americlypse* share Toscano’s concern (as described by Ware) – that literature must not only challenge race and class categories but should also incapacitate our categorizing impulses. From this perspective, literature can inflict identity upon the categorizers themselves (for example, consider Borzutzky’s use of “UnitedStatesian” when referring to hegemonic American culture).

Question:

What must be lost, gained, or incorporated in order to write in a language that is more than merely “trade-pact supported,” but rather reflects a wide range of intellectual and emotional experience from individuals? How is it possible to write in a “globonian” dialect and how do some of the writers in *Americlypse* attempt to do this? Looking at Toscano’s “At a Bus Stop in El Barrio” may help answer this question. And remember, poets are not the only writers concerned with language – fiction writers also address this concern in their work.

Postmodernism and Personhood

Context:

In his aesthetic statement “Nonifesta: On and Around Writing,” Juan Felipe Herrera begins with what could be read as a reference to the literary and philosophical destabilization of ‘the I’ in contemporary thought. His statements seem to respond to the idea of the ‘postmodern condition,’ a theory that there may not be an actual speaker or even person behind our emotions and language and, consequently, that all experience is merely a reference to experiences supplied by the dominant culture (for example, when a person smiles at a dog, this behavior is just a reference to “happiness” – not the *experience* of happiness). From this perspective, ‘the I’ is a false idea – it only stands for a series of references to “humanness” and, furthermore, it is propagated and sustained by a capitalist consumer culture that requires people to think of themselves as individualized “I’s” in order to convince them to buy things. Here is the first part of his aesthetic statement in full:

“After more than forty years of slamming ink on paper, I feel that Lu Chi’s proposition (“to [task] the void”) takes things head on and challenges us, and delights me more than most ideological, ‘literary’ text-centered, socio-political or post-mod raps on writing. To go beyond concept, name, form, idea, *his*story and line and traverse into the moment-world, naked thing of “being” – *in constant transformative motion* – as it in-out pierces this other thing/itself, the “void,” of interconnected universal substance; I am for that; all set to “task,” by the writing hand of tension and flow.” (98)

This sounds much more like a Whitmanic call for liberation of the soul – through personal activity and transcendence into the now – than the postmodern aesthetics briefly outlined above. It also provides yet another branch from the collective of experimental and progressive writers in *Americlypse*. While many writers in *Americlypse* would celebrate “‘literary’ text-centered, socio-political or post-mod raps on writing,” and indeed even supplied some for the anthology, Herrera’s focus is different. At the same time, the outcomes of these two approaches (that of the postmodern writer and the ‘transcendent’ one) are similar: “to go beyond concept, name, form, idea, [and] *his*story” into the present, whether as a de-centered anti-capitalist tornado of contemporary contextualization (see Jennifer Tamayo and Roberto Tejada), or as Herrera’s subversive force of identity.

Question:

How do the two approaches outlined above reflect – or problematize – the work of the editors of *Americlypse*? Are Herrera’s goals anathema to postmodern writers, or do they share common values? Which of the two approaches seem most interesting to you?

Some Quotes

Michael Mejia:

“I suppose the situation is that I’ve been rethinking what I mean by writing and that this activity has become less like creation (a false notion) and something more like collection, appropriation, construction, and arrangement. At the same time, my interest in narrative and the development of character...have given away to the elaboration of complex surfaces...” (168).

Amelia Maria de la Luz Montes:

“To me, [this] is the tenor of writing – inching closer and closer through a scene, uncovering what is often overlooked... [C]haracters take the lead and it becomes a delicate balance, continually exchanging the lead role, listening for cues” (193-194).

Context:

These two writers, Michael Mejia and Amelia Maria de la Luz Montes, provide very different interpretations of the act of writing. Mejia describes creation as “a false notion,” stating that his work is closer to “elaboration” (the discussion or recontextualization of classic themes in contemporary settings and forms) than it is to purely creative generation from the mind of the writer. On the other hand, Montes likens her work to an intimate relationship with another person, whereby the writer creates a character and slowly gets to know them better throughout the writing process by “listening for cues.” Mejia is more concerned with “surfaces” and the plasticity – or malleability – of his writing and the reader’s experience, while Montes treats her work as an *act of discovering what the work will be*.

To put it simply, Mejia describes writing like a theater – where we can see all the working parts and distance ourselves from the imaginary world of the characters – and Montes’ writing is like making a new friend.

Question:

How do Mejia and de la Luz Montes’ writing styles relate to the general project of *Americlypse*? In what ways do their aesthetics challenge marginalization and stereotypes in American culture? And furthermore, what is a “character” in the fiction genre, and how can “character” be used (or misused) to question stereotypes and the sovereignty of mainstream America?

“Genre is a limit that must be tested” (222).

Context:

This statement is taken from Becca Klaver’s introduction to Jennifer Tamayo. She is referencing the poet and performance artist’s integration of various genres and formats into her work, a process that both unravels and over-exposes traditional modes of expression. Klaver uses the term “hybridity” to describe Tamayo’s output, explaining that her often contradictory and unrecognizable assemblages are not an “aesthetic fashion” but rather “a basic fact of her language, her body, and her way of being in the world,” later describing such hybridity as “inevitable.” This hybridity, which includes exaggerated genre-hopping and both hyper- and anti- formalism, is more than a simple literary gadget – *it is a fact of life*.

Question:

“Hybridity” can be used as a lens for the project of *Americlypse*. As well, the writers in the anthology also experience or speak to hybridity in their work and their lives as Latin@ artists. What is “hybrid” about the Latin@ writer, as described in the introduction to *Americlypse*? How does this “hybrid” upset or displace the historicized idea of the Latin American writer? And how did the editors of *Americlypse* incorporate hybridity into the collection?

“Poetry is a supreme affinity with the speech of the world. / Speech in the sense of a secret breath, inhaling, exhaling. / Pulse of the world in a language of perception” (323).

Context:

These lines come from Cecilia Vicuña’s aesthetic statement. The poet implies that speech – an utterance – is also an act of inhalation, a perception. Describing this aesthetic in Vicuña’s work, Julie Phillips Brown writes “it is only through [acts] of attention, ‘affinity,’ and mutual embrace that a poet might write, or a reader might ‘read[,] the world anew.’ Potent but precarious, poetry’s ability to imagine and make the world otherwise is always threatened.” Brown explains that Vicuña’s poetry seeks to create newness with language, in part because the “newness” of language and experience is hazardous to the status quo. Though it may be easy to understand this as a method of creating work, there is another layer to Vicuña’s proposal: that language is not just a method of *producing* meaning but also a way to *consume* the world.

Question:

Considering the excerpt from Vicuña’s work, how do language and perception influence each other? And how does perception, likewise, influence expression and experience? Finally, how does the work of the writers in *Americlypse* attempt to shape, correct, or distort experience through language and narrative techniques?

Assignments:

1. In their introduction, the editors name a variety of important Latin@ writers from the 20th Century who influenced global literature and, in particular, the writers in *Americlypse*. Alurista (Alberto Baltazar Urista Heredia), Gloria Anzaldúa, and Pedro Pietri are mentioned in the first paragraph (along with Juan Felipe Herrera, who is in *Americlypse*). The editors also reference the movements Surrealismo, Antipoesía, Modernismo, and El Boom later on, in addition to a number of other important writers from Latin America.

Pick an author or a movement from the 20th Century mentioned by the editors in the introduction to *Americlypse*. Research your author or movement and read a selection of related texts. Identify the aesthetics, politics, or goals of your movement or author and compare them to *Americlypse* or Latin@ writing. What did Latin@ writers take from their precursors in the 20th Century, and what did they leave behind? In general, what is contemporary Latin@ writing attempting to do now compared to the 1900's?

2. In addition to the authors and movements described by the editors of *Americlypse*, the Latin@ authors themselves reference a number of personal influences. These include well-known writers such as Helene Cixous, Walter Benjamin, and the playwright Tony Kushner, but also obscure figures like Linh Dinh, Eduardo Galeano, and the punk band X. While Helene Cixous is perhaps the most common reference in the anthology, another woman is equally admired – Clarice Lispector, the Brazilian Jewish writer from the mid-20th Century.

Pick a writer who names an author that influenced their work. Briefly research the influential author and read one or more of their well-known texts. Compare the work of the influence to that of the author you chose from *Americlypse*. What did the *Americlypse* author take – or borrow – from their influences? How did the influence shape their work?

3. Choose two writers from the same genre and compare their work. What are they both trying to do, and how do they achieve this? At the same time, try to identify what the writers are trying to *avoid*. How are the writers similar? How are they different? And what is the value of this comparison?
4. In the introduction to Achy Obejas' work, Lupe Linares describes how the author's complexity questions the generalizing tendencies of mainstream culture: "Through [Achy's] use of complex characterization and intricate plotlines, she refuses to allow any individual or cultural history to be filtered through a colonizing gaze" (198). This "colonizing gaze" is what the editors (and many of the authors) refer to when they discuss how their work is expected to be deferential; a "colonizing gaze" expects Latina American writers to reproduce "abuelita" poems and other sentimental cultural nuggets instead of claiming an edgier territory. But the colonizing gaze does not only refer to Latin@ literature – it can be found in the way that news outlets, politicians, and normal citizens understand minorities (and minority cultures) in America as well as cultures from abroad.

On your own, find a current event or news article and analyze it for the "colonizing gaze" described by Linares. How is the subject matter "colonized"? In what ways is the information skewed or distorted to represent a "colonized" subject instead of an authentic and complicated one?