

<http://somatosphere.net/2016/11/syllabus-natureculture-now.html>

## Syllabus: Nature/Culture Now!

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By Elizabeth F.S. Roberts

Nature Culture Now!, an upper division anthropology lecture course at the University of Michigan, traces the trajectory of nature/culture debates in American anthropology through modules on race, sex, and health and disease. The course is co-taught by a biological anthropologist, and myself, a cultural/medical anthropologist. The impetus for Nature/Culture Now! came from a formative experience I had as an undergraduate anthropology major at UC Berkeley in the early 1990s. One of the major course requirements was the blandly titled "Current Issues in Anthropological Thought". Nancy Scheper-Hughes, a cultural and critical medical anthropologist, and Vince Sarich, a biological anthropologist, co-taught "Current Issues" the semester I enrolled. Both professors relished intellectual combat and battled the whole semester about the cultural construction versus the biological essentialness of topics ranging from race, mother love, intelligence and schizophrenia. The arguments were fierce; students took sides and the stakes were extremely high. I learned a tremendous amount watching and participating in these heated and often extremely painful debates.

Almost twenty years later, I wanted to develop a similar course that incorporated recent shifts in theories of nature/culture, building on the four fields strength of the anthropology department at the University of Michigan, especially the dynamism of the biological anthropology subfield. At least from my vantage point as a critical medical anthropologist of the life sciences, cultural constructionism and biological essentialism were no longer useful distinctions for knowing the world, except in tracing how thoroughly the divide continues to shape how we ask questions. Instead, cultural and medical anthropologists, using a situated and constructionist (not cultural constructionist) approaches tend to work to document how historically contingent biological processes are very much part of what shapes lived, expressive worlds, and biological anthropologists, deploying approaches like epigenetics and evolutionary developmental biology, are increasingly focused on how bodies are shaped within particular histories and environments. Nature/Culture Now! is designed around these current approaches, and as we guide students through the course, perhaps the key take away is that biological processes are real, and also constructed.

So far Nature/Culture Now! has gone through three iterations. I have

taught it twice with Abigail Bigham, whose research investigates human genetic adaptation to environmental pressures, and once with Jacinta Beehner who investigates sexual conflict among primates through a comparative lens. While we don't engage in pitched battle, part of the course's success has come from class-wide debates built into the end of each course module. Throughout these debates we do in fact argue about how what counts as knowledge production for cultural and biological anthropologists, is in fact different, which in turn produces different accounts of the world. Students say these debates are invaluable because they have never before seen faculty members describe the underpinnings of knowledge production in regards to race, sex and disease, all issues that they care about deeply.

[Syllabus – Roberts – Nature/Culture Now! 2016](#) (pdf)

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