Global Biocultures: Anthropological Perspectives on Public Health

Course Description

*Global Biocultures* surveys the mutual shaping of culture and biology in diverse contexts around the world. Drawing on sociocultural theories of biocultural process, and ethnographies of food, work, drugs, sex, race, and technology, we will examine biological experience as simultaneously material and socioculturally plastic.

The course is structured around the following questions: Where does the body end and the body’s environment begin? How have ideas about the boundaries between the body and its surroundings changed in recent history? What can an expanded concept of “environment” contribute to work in public health?

This seminar is experimental. We will review classical and contemporary scholarship in medical anthropology, political ecology, queer theory, indigenous studies, and science studies in order to foster creative thinking about the relationship between biology and culture. Over the course of the semester, students will construct a group blog illustrating our emerging insights and reflections.

We will also screen films, host guest lecturers, and document biocultural “artifacts” that we encounter. Students are encouraged to think laterally and creatively as we explore the limits of the biological.
Requirements

• **Attend all course meetings, read all texts, and contribute to discussions.** Please be respectful of others—do not use your phone or web browse during class time. *If you miss a class because of illness, please provide documentation from the Student Health Center or you will be marked absent for that day. If you will not attend a class because of a religious holiday please inform the course assistant at least one week in advance.* Class participation is 10% of the final grade.

• Each course participant will find **one biocultural “artifact”**—a news story, an object, a video, etc. related to that week’s assigned reading. You will present your artifact to the class (5 minutes max). You will also write a 250 word description of the artifact, relating it to the readings, and post it to the course Tumblr. **Write your entry in a word processing program prior to pasting it on the Tumblr, and save a copy for reference.** The presentation and write-up are worth 10% of your final grade.

  URL: [http://globalbioculturesNYU.tumblr.com](http://globalbioculturesNYU.tumblr.com)
  Password: biocultural

• Write **ten short responses** discussing the upcoming week’s readings, and post on your Classes blog. You may choose which weeks to skip. Responses are due by 10pm on Sunday night, should be 200-400 words long, and will be graded for clarity, creative thinking, and engagement with course themes. There is no response due for Week 1. Responses make up 20% of the final grade.

• **Three take-home essay tests.** Each test will ask you to write a 750-1000 word paper addressing a question that draws on one or more course readings, as well as insights explored during course lectures and discussions. Test questions and grading rubrics will be distributed in class on Wednesday and due in class the following Monday. Test dates are October 1 (due October 6), November 5 (due November 10), and December 3 (due December 8). Each essay test is worth 20% of your final grade.

• There is no final exam or paper.

Required Course Books

Joe Dumit. *Drugs for life: How pharmaceutical companies define our health*

Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington *Cheap Meat: Flap food nations in the pacific islands*

Lisa Gezon *Drug effects: Khat in biocultural and socioeconomic perspective*

Seth Holmes *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant farmworkers in the United States*

Kim TallBear *Native American DNA: tribal belonging and the false promise of genetic science*

Articles and selected chapters will be available on Blackboard under this course title, sorted by week.
Academic Integrity

All students must familiarize themselves and comply with NYU's policy on academic integrity and plagiarism: http://cas.nyu.edu/page/ug.academicintegrity. You must submit original work and use proper citation formats in all written assignments. Essay tests will be screened by the Turnitin anti-plagiarism application prior to grading. Students who plagiarize or otherwise cheat will receive a failing grade in the course and disciplinary action will be taken.

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities are entitled to all accommodations as specified in their registration with the Moses Center. Please arrange to see me outside of class if you require accommodations.

Week 1 Course Introduction

Wednesday, September 3

• Intro and syllabus review

Week 2 Thinking Bioculturally

Monday, September 8

• Lennard J. Davis and David B. Morris, “Biocultures Manifesto”

• Hacking, Ian. “Making Up People.”

Wednesday, September 10

• Lock, Margaret and Vinh-Kim Nguyen. “Chapter Four: Local Biologies and Human Difference.”

Week 3 Body Concepts

Monday, September 15

• Mauss, Marcel. “Techniques of the Body”

• Turner, Terry. “The Social Skin.”

• In-class film: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, Bathing Babies in Three Cultures (1951)
Wednesday, September 17

- Duden, Barbara, pp. 1-12; 104-157 from *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor’s Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany*

**Week 4 Sex**

Monday, September 22

- Preciado, Beatriz. “Testo Gel” and “History of Technosexuality” from *Testo Junkie*

Wednesday, September 24

- Bell, Kirsten. 2014. “HIV Prevention: Making Male Circumcision the “Right” Tool for the Job.”

**Week 5 Food**

Monday, September 29

- Gewertz and Errington, *Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific Islands*

Wednesday, October 1


***CLASS EVENING EVENT (OPTIONAL)***: Thursday, October 2 Keith Wailoo
11th Annual Dorothy Nelkin Lecture: “PAIN: Race, Identity, and Public Policy in America.”
6th floor, 20 Cooper Square, 5-7 pm

**Week 6 Race**

Monday, October 6

Wednesday, October 8


Week 7 Drugs Part I

Monday, October 13

- Fall Recess—No class.

Wednesday, October 15

- Dumit, Joe. 2010. Chapters 1 and 2, Drugs for Life

Week 8 Drugs Part II

Monday, October 20

- Dumit, Joe. Chapters 3-6. Drugs For Life.

Wednesday, October 22

- Gezon, Lisa. Part I (pp. 15-92). Drug Effects: Khat in Biocultural and Socioeconomic Perspective

Week 9 Ecologies

Monday, October 27

- Gezon, Lisa. Parts II and III (pp.93-224). Drug Effects: Khat in Biocultural and Socioeconomic Perspective.

Wednesday, October 29

- White-Newsome, Jalone et al. 2014. “Strategies to Reduce the Harmful Effects of Extreme Heat Events: A Four-City Study.”
- In-class film: The Years of Living Dangerously (episode 8)


**Week 10 Resources**

Monday, November 3


- Jacka, Jerry. “‘Our skins are weak’: Ipili modernity and the demise of discipline.”

Wednesday, November 5

- Teiawa, Katerina. “Choreographing difference: the (body) politics of Banaban dance”

**Week 11 Animals**

Monday, November 10

- Haraway, Donna. “Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic: A Political Physiology of Dominance.”

- Kirksey, Eben and Stefan Helmreich. “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography”

Wednesday, November 12

- Rock, Melanie, Eric Mykhalovskiy and Thomas Schlich. “People, other animals and health knowledges: Towards a research agenda”

- Rock, Melanie. “Pet bylaws and posthumanist health promotion: a case study of urban policy”

**Week 12 Mind**

Monday, November 17

- Readings TBA

- **Guest speaker—mental health in Ghana, Lianne Morris-Smith**

Wednesday, November 19


- Luhrmann, Tanya M. 2007. "Social defeat and the culture of chronicity: or, why schizophrenia does so well over there and so badly here.”
**Week 13 Labor**

Monday, November 24

- Engels, Friedrich. “Results”
- Holmes, Seth. Ch. 1-4. *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*

Wednesday, November 26

- Holmes, Seth. Ch. 5-conclusion. *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*.

**Week 14 Fertility**

Monday, December 1


Wednesday, December 3


**Week 15 After Nature/Culture**

Monday, December 8

- Benezra et al. “Anthropology of microbes.”

Wednesday, December 10

- Course wrap-up