

American Material Culture HIS 546/446 Course Syllabus

Fall 2021 | University of North Carolina, Greensboro
Prof. Torren L. Gatson | Email: tlgatson@uncg.edu | Office: HHRA 2119 |
Thursday 2pm-4:50 in Classroom: Bryan Bldg. 111 | Office Hours: Monday 1pm-2pm

Course Description

Material culture is defined as “the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time.”

Material culture includes any and all products of human minds and hands, including landscapes, structures, and both two and three-dimensional objects. This course informs students in history and public history about the history of American material culture. Incorporating multidisciplinary approaches employed in material culture studies we will consider how objects have been used to reinforce, propagate, and resist cultural hierarchies based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and national identity. We will consider these actions with a strong, but not exclusive, emphasis on consumption. Students will read, discuss, and write about the theory and methodology of material culture studies, apply material culture theory and methodology to the study of objects.

Course Requirements

The requirements for this course include assigned readings for each class, strong participation in class discussion (response essays on the assigned readings), two major papers. Assignments submitted in class are due at the beginning of the class period. Students who submit assignments after the deadline will be penalized with a grade deduction based on the lateness of the assignment. No assignments will be accepted more than three days after the due date. All assignments must be submitted in hard copy.

Learning Objectives

This course will enhance students ability to:

1. Demonstrate a commanding knowledge of major patterns of and subfields in the scholarship of American material culture studies;
2. Demonstrate the ability to identify and classify artifacts and landscapes according to their thematic, physical, geographical, and chronological contexts;
3. Demonstrate the ability to synthesize and analyze scholarly literature in the field of American material culture studies; and,
4. Demonstrate the ability to communicate knowledge and assessments effectively both orally and through written reports and documents
5. Demonstrated knowledge of writing concisely, clearly and creatively.

Participation

Contribution to weekly discussion is mandator. Students should come to class prepared to discuss the readings in length on the day that those readings are assigned. Attendance alone is not sufficient for full participation credit. To that end, remember that half of the percentage of participation grade is based on in class contribution to discussion.

Discussion Leader & Response Paper

Each class meeting, a group of students (which I will select) will be responsible for the week's readings and class discussion. Only students who lead discussion in that week are responsible for submitting a response paper to the readings. Response papers should be 3 pages in length and cover all the prescribed readings for that week. Students leading discussion that day must provide at least 4 solid questions for the class to respond.

Materiality Paper

Students will be given a photograph or historical image (Object, painting, etc.) Students must use this image to tell a historically accurate narrative based on their findings regarding this image. The purpose of this exercise is to uncover the layered history of its construction, uses, and the diversity of people using that object. This paper must be 5 to 7 pages in length.

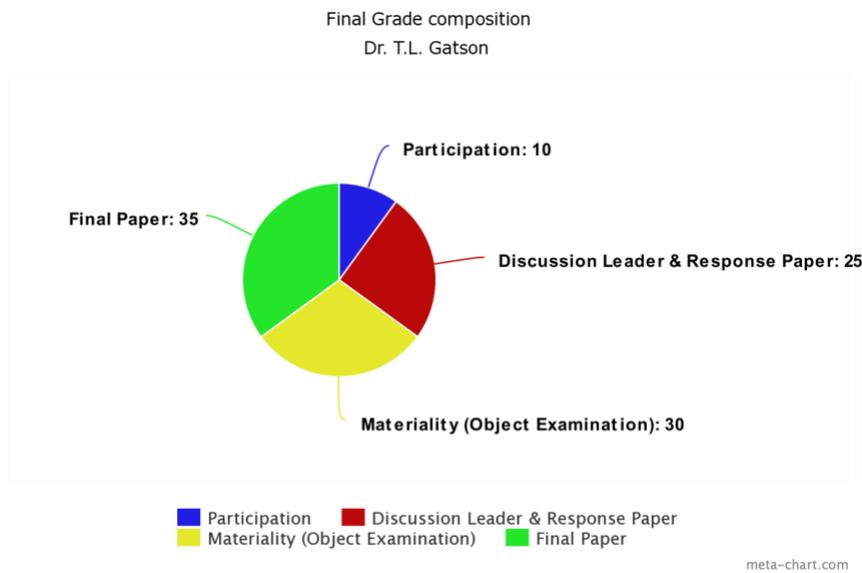
Final Paper

The final paper is an exercise that summons the semesters readings focused on the following questions. How can material culture provide accurate inferences into American history (theory and methodology)? Also, how has material culture changed the way in which we study American history (focus on race, class, and gender)? Lastly, discuss how in certain cases objects or landscapes tell us more than written records which can be flawed by human experience?

Final Grade Composition

- Participation (includes attendance) 10%
- Discussion leader and Response Paper 25%
- Materiality (object examination) Paper 30%
- Final Paper 35%

Grade Scale: A 93-100 / A- 90-92 / B+ 87-89 / B 83-86 / B- 80-82 / C+ 77-79 / C 73-76 / F 72 and below.



Assignments

Any assignment turned in should follow the same logistic layout. All papers are to be written in times new roman using 12 point font. Papers are **NOT** to use headers and must have page numbers at the bottom centered of each page. No title pages will be used. All sources in any paper should be properly cited according to the guidelines laid out in [The Chicago Manual of Style](#), which is available on-line.

Plagiarism Policy

You are responsible for having a keen awareness of how the University defines plagiarism. According to the university: Intentionally or knowingly “representing the words of another, as one's own in any academic exercise.”¹ Please read the universities full statement. [Academic Integrity Policy](#) for further information. All sources (books, articles, documents, etc.) used in any paper or assignment must be properly cited or will be considered plagiarism. Any instance of plagiarism will receive a zero and will be referred to the Dean of Students Office for appropriate action, including suspension or expulsion from the University.

Special Needs

If you require accommodations for special learning needs, please do not hesitate to contact the Office of Accessibility Resources and Services (OARS office), located within the Elliot University Center (334- 5440; <http://ods.uncg.edu>)! I will be very receptive to any steps to help make your learning experience healthier and more successful.

COVID-19

As UNCG returns to face-to-face course offerings in Fall 2021, the campus community must recognize and address concerns about physical and emotional safety. As such, all students, faculty, and staff are required to uphold UNCG’s culture of care by actively engaging in behaviors that limit the spread of COVID-19. Such actions include, but are not limited to, the following:

- [Wearing a face covering that covers both nose and mouth](#) (is mandatory)
- Observing [social distance](#) in the classroom
- Engaging in proper hand washing hygiene when possible
- [Self-monitoring for symptoms of COVID-19](#)
- Staying home if you are ill
- Complying with directions from health care providers or public health officials to quarantine or isolate if ill or exposed to someone who is ill.

Guidelines for Virtual Meetings (If necessary)

Virtual learning (i.e., Zoom, WebEx, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams etc.) may be necessary this semester for a host of reasons (among them COVID-19). That being said, below are a few short guidelines for how this class will operate during any distance learning:

- All participants on the call should be in a learning environment ready to engage (i.e. No one should be in the bed, or in a place not associated with classroom learning)
- All students must be visible at their computer ready to engage in class discussion or lecture

- visual disruptions should be brief so that I am able to see as well as hear your participation, you may need to briefly step away or tend to personal matters.
- Unless you are prompted to speak, please keep your microphone muted as to limit interference and disruption for your other colleagues.
- If you lose service or you are dropped from the call, it is your responsibility to immediately rejoin the class or immediately email the professor or record
- Be prompt to class, arriving before the official start of class (i.e., if class starts at 2:00pm please be in the call at least five minutes earlier)

Required Text for course

Katherine Grier, *Culture and Comfort*. Smithsonian Books; Revised edition (June 22, 2010).

Alison Rose Jefferson, *Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era*. University of Nebraska Press (2020).

Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*. Johns Hopkins University Press (2010).

NOTE*

All other book chapters or articles not listed among required text will be provided available via canvas.

Class Schedule

August 19th

Review of Syllabus and Discussion of the Semester Framework

August 26th

What is Material Culture? Theory and Methodology Unpacked

-Jules David Prown, *Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method*.

-Cary Carson, “Material Culture History: The Scholarship nobody Know.”

-Richard Grassby, “Material Culture and Cultural History.”

Sept 2nd

The Art of Early Consumption

-Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*

Sept 9th

The Art of Early Consumption (continuation)

-Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*

Sept 16th

The Decorative Arts

-Jules David Prown, “Style as Evidence”

-Theodore C. Landsmark, *Comments on African American Contributions to American Material Life*.

Sept 23rd

The Culture of American Burial Practices (cemeteries)

-Leland Ferguson, *God's Fields* (Chapter 4)

-Daniel Patterson, *True Image: Gravestone Art and the Culture of Scotch Irish Settlers in Pennsylvania and Carolina*. (Chapter 4)

-Lynn Rainville, *Hidden Histories African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia* (Chapter 4)

Sept 30th

The Black Hue of Material Culture

-W.E.B. Du Bois, *the Negro Artisan*

-Jennifer Van Horn, "The Dark Iconoclast": African Americans' Artistic Resistance in the Civil War South."

-J.W. Joseph, "Meeting at Market: The Intersection of African American Culture, Craft, and Economy and the Landscape of Charleston, South Carolina"

Oct 7th

Architecture, Preservation, and the Physical Landscape

-Antoinette J. Lee, *From Historic Architecture to Cultural Heritage: A Journey Through Diversity, Identity, and Community*.

Dell Upton, *White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth Century Virginia*.

Richard Longstreth, *Cultural Landscapes: Balancing Nature and Culture in Preservation Practice*. (Chapter 2).

Oct 14th

Reimagining Materiality at Historic Sites

-Frank Vagnone and Deborah Ryan, *Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums*. (pg. 38-45 & pg. 101-149)

Oct 21st

Roadside architecture & the American Leisure and scene (built environment)

Alison Rose Jefferson, *Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era*

Oct 28th

**Leisure and Roadside architecture & the American scene (built environment)
(continuation)**

-Alison Rose Jefferson, *Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era*.

Nov 4th

Markets and representations

-Katherine Grier, *Culture and Comfort*

Nov 11th

student presentations: “Letting Objects speak”

Nov 18th

student presentations: “Letting Objects speak” (continuation)

Dec 2nd

Final Paper Due (no Class)

****Please note, this syllabus is subject to change in any manner, at any time, at the full discretion of the professor of record. ****

If UNCG has any planned or unforeseen change in semester schedule due to COVID-19, I will monitor and adjust this course schedule accordingly.