

African American Material Culture HIS 546/446 Course Syllabus

Fall 2023 | University of North Carolina, Greensboro |
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TR 12:30pm-1:45 in Classroom: SOEB 219 | Office Hours: Tuesday 11pm-12pm

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.”

This seminar’s goal is to provide grounding on the paradigm of material culture as it relates to African American life and culture through theoretical analysis and primary source research. Visual and material culture has been defined from numerous perspectives most notably anthropology, archeology, art history, cultural theory, and history. Since the 1970s in particular, scholars in these and other disciplines have used material culture sources of evidence to explore the everyday lives of ordinary citizens who did not leave written records of their experiences.

Due in part to curatorial efforts and public interest, African American visual and material culture has garnered renewed academic interest and currency. This course examines the longstanding and largely unheralded story about the cultural production of visual and material culture within the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American history. The contemporary moment offers new opportunities to reflect on longstanding yet often marginalized historical and social practices of the process of making for Black people. Using a wide range of methodologies and theoretical approaches we will largely study the Black experience through the lens of material culture genres and subfields of cultural landscapes. We will consider materiality within the following categories with a strong, but not exclusive, emphasis on consumption including, but not limited to, enslavement, foodways, decorative arts, burial and death rituals, interpretative history (public history), and visual and ichnographic culture.

Course Requirements

The requirements for this course include assigned readings for each class, strong participation in class discussion (response essays on the assigned readings when appropriate), and 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.

Cross listed Course

This is a cross section course combining undergraduate and graduate students. **All students are expected to upkeep a rigorous by standard level of participation.** However, there will be at times a distinction between the level and scope of submitted work for graduate students as opposed to undergraduate students, at the professor's discretion.

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. Students leading discussion that day must provide at least 4 solid questions for the class to respond. Discussion leader questions must be approved by me at least two days before the class meeting. Students must first engage the class on the central argument of the reading and whether the author(s) successful in conveying and/or proving their point. Only students who lead discussion in that week are responsible for submitting a response paper to the readings. Response papers should be 4 pages in length and cover all the prescribed readings for that week.

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. Graduate students will prepare a 10-page paper while undergraduates will prepare a 7-page paper.

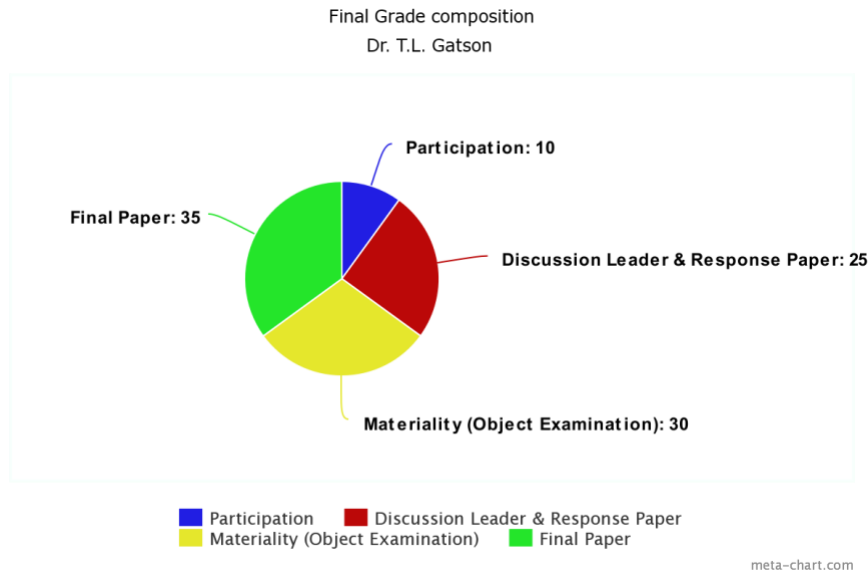
Final Paper

The final paper is an exercise that summons the semesters readings focused on the following questions. How can African American material culture provide accurate inferences into American history (theory and methodology)? Also, how has African American material culture changed the way in which we study and interpret 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? Graduate students will prepare a 12-page paper while undergraduates will prepare a 8-page paper. This paper must in corporate at least half of all the sources used through the semester. You may incorporate other sources as necessary.

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.

Guidelines for Virtual Meetings (If necessary)

Virtual learning (i.e., Zoom, WebEx, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams etc.) may be necessary this semester. 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 (**No blank screen or profile image**) 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 Course Text

All required text (book chapters and/or articles) will be provided via canvas.

Class Schedule

Week 1

August 15th

Review of syllabus and discussion of the semester framework

August 17th

What is Material Culture? Theory and Methodology Unpacked

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

Week 2

August 22nd

What is Material Culture? Object Study

-E. McClung Fleming, Artifact Study: A Proposed Model

August 24th

Creating Craft

-W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Negro Artisan” pg. 1-40

- James Newton, Slave Artisans and Craftsman: The Roots of Afro American Art

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

Week 3

August 29th

Black Materiality in Art

-Bridget R. Cooks, “Negro Art in the Modern Art Museum”

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

August 31st

The Culture of Death

-Leland Ferguson, *God's Fields* (Chapter's 1,2, and 4)

Week 4

September 5th

The Culture of Death (continued)

-James C. Garman, Viewing the Color Line through the Material Culture of Death

-Lynn Rainville, Hidden Histories: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia (Chapters 1, 4, 9, and 10)

September 7th

The Build Environment (Architecture, Preservation, and the Physical Landscape)

The following chapters from the book *Slavery in the City*:

-Introduction, Studying Landscapes of North American Urban Slavery

-Edward Chappell, “Architecture of Urban Domestic Slavery in the Chesapeake and Jamaica”

-Gina Haney, “Understanding Antebellum Charleston’s Backlot Through Lights, Sound, and Action”

Week 5

September 12th

The Build Environment (continued)

-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”

September 14th

Black Women in Material Culture

-Angel David Nieves, *An Architecture of Education: African American Women Design the New South* (Chapters 1, 5, and 6)

Week 6

September 19th

Black Women in Material Culture

Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried* (Chapters Introduction, 3 and 4)

September 21st

Museum Space

-Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*

Week 7

September 26

No Class

September 28

Museum Space (continued)

-Vincent Brown, "The Art of Enslaved Labor" (found in *Hear me Now* exhibition catalog)

Week 8

October 3rd

In class discussion of materiality paper and dissemination of objects

October 5th

In class discussion of final project and paper

Week 9

NO CLASS October 10th & 12th

Week 10

October 17th

Decorative Arts and the Dejure of Observation

-Jules David Prown, "Style as Evidence"

-Tiffany Momon, "John Quash Williams, Charleston Builder" (short note)

October 19th

Decorative Arts and the dejure of observation (continued)

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

Week 11

October 24th

Print Culture and Deciphering the Voice

-Letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson (Found in Jefferson papers)

October 26th

Historical Taboo

-Tiffany Momon, “Shooting for Freedom Examining the Material World of Self Emancipated Persons”

Week 12

October 31st

Diaspora and Material Culture

Guest Speaker Dr. Hewan Germa (AADS)

November 2

Diaspora and Material Culture

Guest Speaker Dr. Jasmine Graves (AADS)

Week 13

November 7th

Meeting with Dr. Gatson concerning final papers

November 9th

Meeting with Dr. Gatson concerning final papers

Week 14

November 14th

student presentations: “Letting Objects Speak”

Final Paper Due Virtual submission (no Class)

November 16th

student presentations: “Letting Objects speak” (continuation)

Week 15

November 21st and 23rd

No Class Observance of Thanksgiving

Week 16

November 28th

No Class (preparing final papers)

November 30th

LAST DAY OF CLASS

Final Paper Due and class debrief

****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,
I will monitor and adjust this course schedule accordingly.**