American Studies 205: Material Aspects of American Life
Online Course
Winter 2012

Instructor: Jessica Walker
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Office Hours: By appointment

COURSE OVERVIEW:

This course is dedicated to understanding the meaning of the stuff that populates our everyday lives. Whether it is the objects in our homes, the cars we drive, the clothes we wear, or the foods we eat, this stuff has profound cultural significance. During the three weeks, we will work to understand this significance as we evaluate the role material objects play in shaping culture in America as well as how culture influences the way in which objects are collected, interpreted, displayed and understood.

In order to create the context for the study of material objects, we will begin the course by examining culture, identity, and a bit of critical theory. We will then explore several methods for analyzing objects before moving to apply what we’ve learned to a variety of topics. We will conclude the semester with a final project in which you will analyze the cultural significance of an object of your choosing.

This course operates under the premise that structural/institutional racism, sexism, and heterosexism (when we assume heterosexuality is the normative sexuality) exists. We are therefore not asking if these forms of oppression occur, but rather how they operate in relation to the study of material life. Throughout the semester we will continually reflect upon how racism, sexism, and heterosexism impact the ways in which material objects are produced, collected, and consumed.

COURSE STRUCTURE:

Everyday students are expected to (1) complete all the readings, (2) respond to discussion prompts, (3) review lecture notes, (4) post reflections due weekly on Friday by 11pm.

Students are expected to check the Announcements regularly as things are bound to shift and adjust.

Course time is from 12-4pm everyday. I do not expect you to be online for three hours. However, during this time each student is obligated to do three things:
   1. Respond to the discussion leader’s prompt.
   2. Respond to another student’s response.
   3. Raise questions from the previous days lecture notes.
DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

Both responses in the discussion space should be 500 words, 12 pt font. I will be moderating discussion and will be expecting everyone to be respectful and professional with his or her language. Any comments or remarks that violate the guidelines of this learning community will result in consequences including loss of class participation points. See the “Class Expectations” section below for more on this.

Students must post 500-word response to the prompt from the discussion leader and a 250 word response to another students post. This should be a friendly but scholarly critique that can extend the first student’s idea, address their assumptions, or present agreeing or conflicting evidence from the texts. To receive full credit toward class participation, students must respond to at least two (2) of prompts as well as another students’ response. Students should feel free to incorporate discussions, or questions from daily discussion assignments into their weekly reading reflections due on Friday.

Rubric for Discussion Post:

Exceptional
- Post weekly on time
- Shares thoughts, ideas, or opinions.
- Specific details support the main idea
- Has a "So What?", theme, lesson, or specific point that attracts the readers' attention
- Demonstrates detailed understanding of the blog topic
- Makes connections to readings from other weeks
- Positive tone engages the reader
- Uses clear punctuation, grammar and capitalization.
- Response to other students’ comments in a positive, professional, and critical way
- Demonstrates understandings of prompt and engages directly with questions asked in the prompt.

Satisfactory
- Post often
- General familiarity with course materials
- Acceptable engagement of issues raised in prompt
- Mostly summary and description with few connections made between ideas
- Fair uses of proper punctuation, grammar, and capitalization
- Post reflects a passing engagement with the topic
- Good engagement with other students’ comments

Unsatisfactory
- Post are not frequent
- Rehashes previous statements
- Mostly description or summary
- Tendency to go off topic
- Little to no attention to proper punctuation, grammar, and capitalization
• Unwillingness to engage in prompt and other students’ comments

Fail
• Does not post blogs weekly
• No evidence of familiarity with readings or course concepts
• Rarely keeps to topic
• Total lack of attention to punctuation, grammar, and capitalization.
• No engagement with other students posts

Requirements for Discussion Leader: The discussion leaders will email me (jaw5@umd.edu) 1 question, comment, or concern drawn from the readings everyday by 11am. Questions should come from more than one reading. Questions can range from points of confusion, to aspects of the reading you wish to get multiple perspectives on.

LECTURE NOTES:

Lecture Notes will be posted by 6pm everyday. Students are expected to review lecture notes in order to add to their own understanding of the readings and not necessarily for summaries of the text. Lecture notes highlight aspects of the text that are important to the themes of the course. My notes will also include a collective response to that day’s online discussion.

GUIDELINES FOR WEEKLY REFLECTIONS:

Weekly reflections are due every week by Friday at 11pm.

Students will write weekly one page (single spaced, 12 Time New Roman font) reflections to readings. Do post your response on the ELMS discussion board under the proper day heading. I may give you specific questions to answer for certain weeks so please check the Announcements often.

Responses help hone your analytical skills for "cracking" a work of scholarship and summarizing its main arguments concisely. This is the chief skill required for successful college writing. A good response should cover the following items:
• Main argument(s)
• Purpose(s) and audience(s) of the text
• What sources does the author use?
• Your assessment of strengths and weaknesses
• How do you see the issues the author discusses in your everyday life?

Responses should be formal documents (polished and proofread) in which you reflect upon and respond to major points raised in each week's reading assignments. You should be referencing at least 2 text in each response. Direct quotes are never a bad idea. Use your response to engage with the texts, to help you digest the ideas presented therein, to make these concepts your own, reject them (with cause), relate them to other ideas or scholarly sources you know, or otherwise make sense of them in some way. Write your response for
yourself and aim to have, at the end of the three weeks, a document that records the gist of key readings and your responses to them. By answering these questions every week students should by slowly gathering content for their final paper.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES:**

- Define “material culture studies” and understand its relevance to American Studies and culture at large;
- Comprehend and apply a variety of methods of analyzing the objects we encounter in our everyday lives;
- Explain the relationship between material objects and individual and group identity;
- Understand the interplay between culture and material objects;
- Apply the course concepts and methods to the analysis of an everyday object.

**REQUIRED MATERIALS:**

**Articles and Chapters:** There are no required textbooks for this course. Instead, articles and chapters will be provided in the Course Documents section on the course Blackboard site. Additional content will be in the course Media Reserves on ELMS.

**COURSE EXPECTATIONS AND POLICIES:**

**Keep up with the course readings.**
The readings are the foundation of this course. Our classroom discussions, midterm exam, written assignment and final paper will all be based on the readings, so if you want to do well in the course, it is crucial that you keep up with the readings.

**Come to class prepared.**
Readings and assignments are to be completed before class discussion and you must have questions and comments about the readings to ensure active participation.

**Maintain a respectful digital classroom environment.**
In this class, we will discuss issues dealing with race, gender, sexuality and other sensitive topics. It is important to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable to voice his or her ideas. This is especially true in the digital classroom. Mean-spirited and disrespectful remarks made either to the instructor or other students will not be tolerated. You are entitled to free speech and expression, and I ask you to recognize that everyone has those rights as well. I also ask you to respectfully communicate with your classmates and me.

**Turn in assignments on time.**
You are required to turn in each assignment on the day and time that it is due. If you do not submit an assignment on time, I will deduct a letter grade from your assignment score for each day that it is late.

**If you need help, ask!**
Because of 21st century technology I am always reachable. I expect students to take advantage of this and contact me whenever you have questions or concerns. I am here to
help, so please do not hesitate to ask. If you feel lost or if there is something in need of further explanation, let me know!

**Students with disabilities**
If you have registered a learning or physical disability with UMD’s Disability Support Services (http://www.counseling.umd.edu/DSS/), please tell me by *Tuesday, September 6* so we can make suitable accommodations.

**Excused Absences**
Excused absences include illness, religious observances, participation in University activities at the request of University Authorities, and compelling circumstances beyond the student’s control.

For every medically necessary absence from class, you should make a reasonable effort to notify me in advance of the class. You must bring me a signed note (hard copy) identifying the date of and reason for the absence, and acknowledging that the information in the note is accurate. If you are absent on a day when there is a pop quiz, you will be expected to take the quiz the day you return to class.

If you are absent more than 1 times, you will be required to provide documentation signed by a health care professional.

If you are absent on a day when a test is scheduled, a paper is due, or any other major graded event occurs, you should notify me in advance, and upon returning to class, bring documentation of the illness, signed by a health care professional.

**Unexcused Absences**
After two unexcused absences, I will deduct from your final grade five points for each subsequent unexcused absence.

**Academic Integrity**
Violations of expected academic conduct include plagiarism, inappropriate collaboration, dishonesty in examinations (in-class or take-home), dishonesty in papers, work done for one course submitted to another, deliberate falsification of data, interference with other students’ work, and copyright violations. These violations are all defined in the University of Maryland’s Honor Code (http://www.jpo.umd.edu/aca/honorpledge.html). Please familiarize yourself with entirety of this code if you have not already.

When in doubt regarding appropriate academic conduct, including scholarly citations and other issues, please consult me rather than waiting for a problem to develop.

“The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please
visit http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/whatis.html.”

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. Class Participation: 200 points possible; 40% of your final grade
   • **Attendance 50 points possible:** I will take attendance at every class session, but you need to do more than just be present—you will need to make a substantive contribution to the class discussion. This means consistent contribution to discussion boards and other weekly assignments.
   • **Discussion Responses:** 75 points possible: Between 12pm-4pm DAILY.
   • **Reading Reflections 75 points possible (25 points each):** Every week by **Friday at 11pm.**

3. Midterm Quiz: 100 points possible; 20% of your final grade
   The midterm exam will address the material covered during the few weeks of the course. It will be an online quiz. The midterm will all be 15-25 multiple choice questions.

Exam Date: Wednesday January 11, 2012

5. Final Paper: 200 points possible; 40% of your final grade
   For the final project, you will put together everything you learn over the course of the semester and develop a material culture analysis of an object. In this 5-7 page paper, you will first create a methodology for analyzing a material culture object. You will then use your methodology and concepts from the course to analyze an object of your choosing. I will provide you with more details about the final project later in the semester.

Final Paper Due: Monday, January 23, 2012

Exam/Assignment Dates:
Midterm Exam—Wednesday January 11, 2012
Final Paper—Monday January 23, 2012

COURSE GRADING:
Your final grade will reflect your accumulation of X amount of points out of 500. The following scale will designate your final grade:

- **A-, A, A+** 90% and above 450 points and above
- **B-, B, B+** 80-89% 400-449 points
- **C-, C, C+** 70-79% 350-399 points
- **D** 60-69% 300-349 points
An A-, A, or A+ indicates excellent mastery of the subject and outstanding scholarship.
A B-, B, or B+ indicates good mastery of the subject and good scholarship.
A C-, C, or C+ indicates satisfactory mastery of the subject and average expected achievement.
A D indicates borderline comprehension of the subject and marginal performance.
An F indicates failure to understand the subject and unsatisfactory performance.

COURSE CALENDAR (subject to minor adjustments)

Week 1

Tues., Jan 3rd
- Introductions and Syllabus Review
- Introduction Blog Post

Wed., Jan. 4
- Lynn Weber Handout

Thr., Jan 5
- John Caughey, Negotiating Cultures and Identities (2005), 14-22.

Fri., Jan. 6

Week 2

Mon., Jan 9

**Tues., Jan 10**

- Black Enterprise: “Hip-Hop Economy Explodes”
- The Fake Trade Part 1: http://www.veoh.com/watch/v6957332br5KKG6Q
- *The Story of Stuff*: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLBE5QAYxp8

**Thr, Jan 12**

- Anne Allison, “Japanese Mothers and Obentos: The Lunch-Box as Ideological State Apparatus” In *Food and Culture: A Reader* (2008), 221-239.

**Fri. Jan 13**


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**Week 3**
Mon., Jan. 16
- Peirce F. Lewis, “Common Landscapes as Historic Documents,” in *History from Things*, 115-139.
- David Byrne “Nervous Landscapes”.

Tues., Jan. 17

Wed., Jan. 18
- Start to work on introduction for Final Papers due Thursday.
- Visit a Virtual Exhibit:
  - National Museum of the American Indian ([any of these exhibitions](http://www.nmai.si.edu/Exhibits/))
  - U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum ([any of these exhibitions](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/NotJustNed/))
  - Soweto '76 [Archive](http://www.wits.ac.za/humanrights/soweto76/)
  - Reclaiming Identity: [Dismantling Arab Stereotypes](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/disarabstereotypes.php)
  - [The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia](http://www.jimmecrow.org/)

Thurs., Jan 19
- Course Overview and Take-Away Exercise.
- Turn in Introduction to Final Paper and paper outline if you wish by 11pm.

Fri., Jan 20
- No Reflection Due. Work on Final Papers.

**Final Paper Due: Jan 23 by 5pm. Please email me your paper: jaw5@umd.edu**