

ANTHROPOLOGY (ANG) 6427
The Social Lives of Things

Prof. Susan D. Gillespie	Fall 2023
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Office: B338 Turlington, Phone 352-294-7595 (voicemail)	Class Meets Wed Per 3-5
Office Hours: W 1-3 pm, Th 2-3 pm	Tur 1208 H
www.people.clas.ufl.edu/sgillesp	3 Credits

*“A crucial area of thought in all the social sciences at present is **the relationship between people and things.**”¹*

Catalog Description: Anthropological and related theories and approaches to the recursive social relationships enacted between humans and things focusing on things themselves, both human-made entities and human-manipulated substances.

Course Description: In this advanced seminar in anthropological theory, we explore the burgeoning literature on things heralded by phenomenological philosopher Edmund Husserl’s famous slogan, “back to the things themselves” (ca. 1936). It helped to stimulate a scholarly shift known as the “(re)turn to things” or the “material turn” that began in the 1980s in social sciences and humanistic disciplines disenchanted by the over-emphasis on discourse, representations, and other ephemera. This shift was heralded in anthropology by Arjun Appadurai’s 1986 book, *The Social Life of Things*. Our focus is on anthropological and related approaches to *materiality*—the recursive relationships enacted between humans and things. More specific topics include thing theory, experiencing things (phenomenology), object agency and human-thing entanglement, the social lives of things-in-motion, relational ontologies, things as signs (semiotics), magical things, technology as making/unmaking things, things and the body, things and social identity, and the matter of mutable things, including loss and decay.

Course Design: This course is designed for graduate students in Anthropology, History, Art and Art History, Sociology, Museum Studies, Media Studies, Design, Performance, and related fields dealing with the social and experiential aspects of materiality and “material culture.”

Course Goals and Student Learning Objectives: At the end of this course students will be able to:

- Identify theories of materiality and articulate their historical development.
- Recognize the ontological status of things in contrast to objects, how things “thing.”
- Distinguish the major theories of object agency.
- Explain how things act as signs in different sign modes, “thinking through things.”
- Articulate how and why things are considered magical.
- Apply object biography and object itinerary as investigative methods.
- Distinguish “gift” from “commodity” in Maussian and neo-Marxian concepts.
- Explain the role of making and unmaking in human-thing relationships.
- Evaluate the matter of things in terms of affordances and constraints, and potential and actualized

¹Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects,” *World Archaeology* 31(2):169-178, 1999, p. 169.

- properties, by which people are entangled with things.
- Recognize the dynamic role of taphonomy and decay in people-thing relationships.
- Discriminate various types of hybridity of bodies and things.
- Evaluate theories for the emergence of relationships between people and things, and between people through things.
- Explain the necessity of things in constructing and enacting identities.
- Apply one or more of these concepts and methods to their own research interests as an original paper and oral presentation.

Canvas: Go to elearning.ufl.edu: the syllabus and announcements are here, readings are listed under weekly modules, and discussion questions are to be posted here as well. Set your notifications to be contacted at least daily for new discussion board posts or comments from the instructor.

Class Demeanor: This is a seminar, *not* a lecture course. Information for each class is drawn from the assigned readings. Every student is expected to bring the week's readings to class (hard copy or in digital format) and be prepared to participate fully in class discussions of the reading assignments.

Readings: This is a reading-intensive course. Required and some recommended readings can be downloaded as journal articles; book chapters are available in pdf form on Canvas. *VPN is required* to access e-journals from a non-University computer. In addition, three textbooks are required, and three are recommended. They are available for purchase and are on reserve in Library West.

Required Books (on reserve)

1. Candlin, Fiona, and Raiford Guins, eds. (2009) *The Object Reader*
Routledge. 978-0415452304 paperback –buy it used (\$36)
2. Tilley, Christopher, et al., eds. (2006) *Handbook of Material Culture* (a library e-book)
Sage Publications. 978-1446270561 paperback (\$23)
3. Hicks, Dan, and Mary Beaudry, eds. (2010) *Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*
paperback (2018) Oxford University Press. 978-0198822554 (\$45)

Recommended Books (on reserve)

1. Boivin, Nicole (2008) *Material Cultures, Material Minds: The Impact of Things on Human Thought, Society, and Evolution*. paperback (2010)
Cambridge University Press. 978-0521873970 buy it used (\$30)
2. Ingold, Tim (2013) *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*
Routledge. 978-0415567237 paperback (\$32)
2. Appadurai, Arjun (1986) *The Social Life of Things*.
Cambridge University Press. 978-0521357265 paperback (\$25) [*pdf of book on Canvas*]

Contacting the Instructor: The preferred method is by email, either through Canvas or directly. Please put the course name or number in the subject line. If the topic is urgent, please indicate that. Messages will be acknowledged within 48 hours.

Attendance: Because this seminar is designed around in-class discussions of the reading material, missing class will prove detrimental to your understanding of that material as well as to the other students' understandings, because your contribution will be lost. More than one absence and frequent tardiness will be noted and result in a drop in the final letter grade (e.g., from A to A-). Failure to be prepared for or to participate in discussion is not much different from being absent.

Class Participation Requirements: All students are expected to discuss all the readings each week. Readings must be finished *before* class meets so that you have thought about and are prepared to discuss them. Notes must be taken on each reading and brought to class. In addition, each student is expected to **post** (at least) **four specific relevant questions or comments that lead to discussion** drawn from at least **four** different readings. They are to be posted on the Canvas discussion board for each week by **NOON on Tuesday afternoon before class**. You must read what is already posted there before uploading your questions to avoid duplication. If someone has already taken your question, compose a different one. You are also expected to read *all* postings before class, and **respond to at least four** of them (responses are in addition to questions) by **8:00 pm** Tuesday evening. You may respond to questions drawn from the same reading from which you created a question, as long as it is a different question from the one you asked. *Everyone is expected to have read all questions and responses before class begins* Wednesday morning. The panels are expected to use those questions, as well as their own, to direct discussion. Posting and reading questions and responses (akin to reflective reading essays) make up 50% of the class participation grade (50 points). The other 50% is based on active and informed contributions to in-class discussion each week. *Passive individuals who prefer instead to listen to others cannot earn an A in this course.*

Student panels are responsible for leading discussion of special topics in the last half of the semester. Panels are assigned on a “first-come” basis. The panel should meet before that class to decide the important questions to be discussed, and panel members are encouraged to consult with me. Panels will disseminate their discussion questions by email to the rest of the class by **7:00 pm Tuesday** before the Wednesday class meeting, relying in part on the questions posted by other students.

Research Paper and Presentation: Students will formulate and develop an *original* analysis of empirical data using a selection of these theories, concepts, and methods on a topic relevant to the course and their research interests. The data must emphasize material phenomena— anthropogenic objects, structures, or features and their making (or unmaking), as well as “natural” or physical substances—rather than discourse or direct observation, although the latter may be used as secondary sources of information from historical documents, participant observation, or justified analogy. Paper topics must be pre-approved by mid-semester. An in-class professional quality powerpoint oral presentation (15 minutes) is required together with the final paper. The paper should be in the format of a publishable article (c. 8000 words of text), double-spaced, 12 point font, suitable for a journal such as *Journal of Material Culture*, **OR** the content section of a grant submission (NSF, NEH) for students lacking a finished analysis. See syllabus for due dates of presentations and final papers.

Components of Final Grade:

Timely posting of *informed* discussion questions and responses each week: 50 pts, 25% of grade
Active participation in every class discussion and performance as panelists: 50 pts, 25% of the grade
Original research paper or grant proposal: 80 pts, 40% of grade
Oral presentation: 20 pts, 10% of grade

TOTAL: 200 pts

Make-up Policy: Students with excused absences will not be penalized for missed discussion but are expected to learn the material on their own and to submit discussion questions and responses even if past the deadline. Students unable to finish the presentation or paper on time must meet the requirements and submit the paperwork to receive an Incomplete grade. See full attendance and make-up policy on page 5.

GRADES: Letter grades are assigned at the end of the semester, based on a total of 200 points. See the grading scale below. See University policy: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	E
180-200	176-179	170-175	160-169	156-159	150-155	140-149	136-139	130-135	120-129	116-119	115 -0
4.00	3.67	3.33	3.00	2.67	2.33	2.00	1.67	1.33	1.00	.67	0.00

WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF TOPICS
see Canvas Modules for all Assignments

Week	Date	Topic
1	8/23	Introduction: Materiality and the Return of Things
2	8/30	Early Social Theory: Marx and Mauss on Things
3	9/6	Phenomenology: Experiencing Things
4	9/13	Thing Theories Today: Things, Objects, Materials
5	9/20	Object Agency and Relational Ontology: Entanglement and Thingworlds
6	9/27	Following Things-in-Motion: Biography, Itinerary, Duration, Stoppages
7	10/4	Semiotics: The Meanings of Things
8	10/11	Magical Things (panel 1); <i>research project approval deadline</i>
9	10/18	Making/Unmaking Things: Technology and Art (panel 2)
10	10/25	Things and the Body: Hybrids and Cyborgs (panel 3)
11	11/1	Things and Identity: Self, Person, Community, Authenticity (panel 4)
12	11/8	Absent Things: Loss, Decay, Rubbish, Ruins (panel 5)
13	11/15	individual meetings to finalize paper
	11/22	<i>Thanksgiving Holiday</i>
14	11/29	oral paper presentations
15	12/6	final papers due, hard copy, by noon [last day of class]

ACCEPTANCE OF COURSE REQUIREMENTS: By remaining registered in this class, you indicate your agreement to accept the course requirements and expectations as stated in this syllabus. These are in addition to other general University requirements and codes of conduct as stated in official documents. *Please fill out the grad information form on Canvas by the second class meeting.*

The following information is provided in conformance with University Policy: *Please Read!*

1. Policy related to class attendance, make-up exams, and other work

Requirements for class attendance, excused absences, make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies (<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>). University policy states that absences count *from the first class meeting*. “In general, acceptable reasons for absence from or failure to participate in class include illness, serious family emergencies, special curricular requirements (e.g., judging trips, field trips, professional conferences), military obligation, severe weather conditions, religious holidays and participation in official university activities such as music performances, athletic competition or debate. Absences from class for court-imposed legal obligations (e.g., jury duty or subpoena) must be excused. The university recognizes the right of the individual professor *to make attendance mandatory*. After due warning, professors can prohibit further attendance and subsequently assign a failing grade for excessive absences.” The UF Twelve-Day Rule for student-athletes (<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx#absences>) states that students who participate in athletic or scholastic teams are permitted to be absent 12 scholastic (regular class) days per semester without penalty. Students seeking this exemption *must provide documentation* to the instructor for each absence and must maintain satisfactory academic performance and attendance.

2. Religious observances

Students seeking modification of due dates for class participation, assignments, and exams for religious reasons (e.g., holiday observances) should contact the instructor in advance and request this modification; it will then be granted. Please make requests early in the semester.

3. Accommodations for students with disabilities

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should register with the [Disability Resource Center](#) (352-392-8565) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, instructors will receive an accommodation letter, which will be emailed to the instructor. Students should contact the instructor to ensure that the accommodations are appropriately made. They should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

4. Academic honesty

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.” The Honor Code (<https://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Instances of dishonesty include conducting unauthorized research on the internet and failing to cite sources of information on any work submitted, as well as unauthorized collaborating with students or others to determine the answers on assignments and exams. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel.

All suspected instances of violations of the Honor Code (plagiarism, copying, cheating) will be reported to the Dean of Students Office. Students who have not committed any prior violations will be sanctioned by the instructor; the usual penalty is a loss of all credit for the plagiarized assignment, or a grade of 0 on an exam. Students with prior violations will be sanctioned according to the Honor Code Resolution Process (<http://regulations.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/4042.pdf>). If you have any questions about what constitutes cheating or plagiarism, or have concerns about completing an assignment on time, please consult with the instructor.

5. Counseling and Emergency Services

U Matter, We Care serves as the umbrella program for UF’s caring culture and provides students in distress with support and coordination of a wide variety of appropriate resources. Contact umatter@ufl.edu seven days a week for assistance if you are in distress. Call 352-392-1575 for a crisis counselor in the nighttime and weekends.

- the University Counseling Center, 301 Peabody Hall, 392-1575; <http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Default.aspx>
- Student Health Care Center, 392-1171
- Career Resource Center, Reitz Union, 392-1601
- Center for Sexual Assault/Abuse Recovery and Education (CARE), Student Health Care Center, 392-1161
- University Police Department 392-1111 (non-emergency); call 9-1-1 for emergencies

6. Online course evaluation process

Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. Guidance on how to give feedback in a professional and respectful manner is available at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/students/>. Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens, and can complete evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via <https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/>. Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/>.

7. Electronic Course Reserves

The electronic course reserve service is offered by the George A. Smathers Libraries. Under the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, students with disabilities have the right to equal access, use and benefit of the course materials that have been placed on reserve in the Libraries.

Students who have registered with the Disability Resource Center should initiate their request for assistance and accommodation in accessing these materials. The Center will work with the Libraries Course Reserve Unit to provide accessible course materials. All information submitted by the student to the Libraries in fulfilling the request for accommodation will be kept confidential. For more information on services for students with disabilities, contact the DRC at 352-392-8565 or at accessuf@dso.ufl.edu. For general information on course reserves, please contact the Course Reserves Unit at 352-273-2520, or email at eres@uflib.ufl.edu.

If you are not using a UF computer, it is best to **use the UF VPN client** when accessing electronic materials course reserve materials as well as e-books, on-line journals, databases, etc. offered by the library. The VPN client is easily installed and configured, and provides easy access to electronic materials using off-campus computers. For more information on using the VPN client, go to <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/login/vpn.html>

8. Software Regulations

All faculty, staff and students of the University are required and expected to obey the laws and legal agreements governing software use. Failure to do so can lead to monetary damages and/or criminal penalties for the individual violator. Because such violations are also against University policies and rules, disciplinary action will be taken as appropriate.