COMMODITY CONSUMPTION AND THE FORMATION OF CONSUMER CULTURE
ANTH 277 / FGSS 278

TUESDAY / THURSDAY 10.30 – 11.50AM
ROOM: FISK 210

Professor Sarah Croucher
Email: scroucher@wesleyan.edu
x 4489
Office hours: Wed 2–4pm or by appointment (ANTH 26)

Professor Betsy Traube
Email: etraube@wesleyan.edu
x 3066
Office hours: Thurs 3:30-5:30pm or by appointment (ANTH 1)

Course Description
In all societies goods have symbolic as well material uses, but what is variously known as “consumer culture”, “commodity culture”, or “the culture of consumption” is associated with the expansion of commodity production and the capitalist economy. Otherwise put, all people consume goods and convey meaning through their consumption practices, but individuals have only recently, and unevenly, learned to define themselves as consumers and to experience commodity consumption as central to the formation and expression of identities. The periodization of consumer culture remains a contested issue. Some analysts reserve the term for the increasingly segmented markets that began to be produced in Euro-American societies over the latter part of the twentieth century, while others have backdated its origins to the early modern period. In this course we take the latter approach and begin with changes in working-class and middle-class consumption habits over the 18th century as people began consuming new goods, some produced domestically and others in the colonies. Rather than a close, detailed historical account of particular cases, we will present a series of thematically focused reflections centered on particular moments in the development of consumer culture in the UK and the US; we also look at issues in the globalization of consumer goods in several “developing” nations. Throughout, we emphasize the role of things in connecting people separated by distance, time, interests, and resources. We call attention to: relations between production and consumption; the trajectories or “social lives” of things-in-motion; the multiple forms of value they may carry; the roles of producers and consumers in giving meaning and value to things; the different social positions from which people confront the “world of goods” and the ways in which they incorporate particular goods into their everyday lives; inequalities in access to consumer goods, as well as the diverse styles and identities created through consumption.
All readings are available on Moodle: there are no assigned books for this class. Please check Moodle regularly for readings; if there is a change in relation to the syllabus, the Moodle version will be the correct version.

Assessment:

» Class presentation (10 -15 minutes, in small groups), Thursday September 27 (worth 5% of grade)
» One 3 page short paper, due Friday October 12, 5pm (worth 20% of grade)
» One 2 page reading response paper, due Tuesday October 30, 9.30am (worth 10% of grade)
» Participation in class debates (including preparation), Thursday December 6 (worth 5% of grade)
» Research paper outline including annotated bibliography, 2-3 pages, due Tuesday November 20, 5pm (worth 10% of final grade)
» Final research paper based on consumption practices (9-12 pages), due Wednesday December 14 (worth 50% of final grade)

We have included several small items that encourage active and thoughtful participation through the semester, and a research project which we would encourage you to think about early in the semester. Class attendance will be taken into account and active, thoughtful participation may count positively towards final grades.

Both of us are sympathetic towards those who may require extensions on written work. However, all extensions must be authorized and arrangements should be made with us well in advance of the deadline.

Missing in-class assessed work (presentations and debates) will require an email (prior to the class) from your dean to let us know that you cannot attend because of illness or for other reasons. We will expect some form of equivalent written work to make up any missed in-class assessment.

Optional fieldtrip to Whole Foods: Two different times are available for this trip (Friday October 12 and Wednesday October 17). Please sign up early to ensure your spot in the trip which best suits your timetable. We would strongly encourage you to participate in these trips. They will help you to think about viewing consumer culture through an ethnographic lens as you begin to develop your final projects. We have also been promised some free samples during the tours as an extra incentive to attend.
Please read Moodle for our full policy on laptop computers. We encourage their use as an aid for class work. However, we request that they are not used in the back three rows of the classroom, and that you do not use your computer for email, Facebook, or similar applications during class. We find that following these guidelines helps those who use laptops in class to stay more focused.

Disability Policy

It is the policy of Wesleyan University to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Students, however, are responsible for registering with Disabilities Services, in addition to making requests known to me in a timely manner. If you require accommodations in this class, please make an appointment with one of us soon as possible (by preference during the first two weeks of the semester), so that appropriate arrangements can be made. The procedures for registering with Disabilities Services can be found at http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/disabilities/studentguide.html.
### Class Schedule and Readings:

**Tuesday September 4**  
Introduction; no assigned reading

---

**Capitalism and Commodities: A Brief History**

**Thursday September 6**  


**Tuesday September 11**  


---

**Consumers: The Romantic Origins of Modern Consumerism**

**Thursday September 13**  
Gift/Commodity: Entangled Transactions

Tuesday September 18


Thursday September 20


Commodification of Intimate Life

Tuesday September 25


Thursday September 27
Class presentations, readings TBA
Advertising, Branding, and Media in Capitalist Modernity

Tuesday October 2


Thursday October 4

Shopping Spaces: Department Stores and Malls

Tuesday October 9


Thursday October 11

Chin, E. *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*. Chapter 4 (“Hemmed In and Shut Out”)
Supermarkets

Whole Foods Fieldtrip option I: **Friday October 12**: Recommended reading, Johnston (see below)

Tuesday October 16 FALL BREAK, no class

Whole Foods Fieldtrip option II: **Wednesday October 17**: Recommended reading, Johnston (see below)

**Thursday October 18**


Taste, Class, and Lifestyle

**Tuesday October 23**

Recommended:

**Thursday October 25**
Ethical Consumption: The Case of Coffee

**Tuesday October 30**


Two page reading response due by 9.30am

**Thursday November 1**


Style and Identity: How Clothes Make Men

**Tuesday November 6**

Peiss, K. 2011. *Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style*. Chapter 1 (Making the Suit Zoot) & Chapter 2 (Going to Extremes)

Moss, M. 2011. *The Media and Modes of Masculinity*. Chapter 3 (Masculine Adornment)

**Thursday November 8**

Guest Lecturer: Nikko Misko Lencek-Inagaki (Wesleyan 2007)
Style and Identity: Refashioning Bodies

**Tuesday November 15**

**Thursday November 15**

Global Consumers

**Tuesday November 20**

Hand in paper outline

Thursday November 22 THANKSGIVING BREAK

Bodies for Sale

**Tuesday November 27**

Moss, M. 2011, *The Media and the Modes of Masculinity*. Chapter 10 (Sports and Media Culture)

**Thursday November 29**
Class Debates

*Tuesday December 4*
Preparation session, Readings TBA

*Thursday December 6*
In-Class Debates

---

**Final Research Paper, due Wednesday December 14, 5pm**

http://500px.com/photo/6704992