

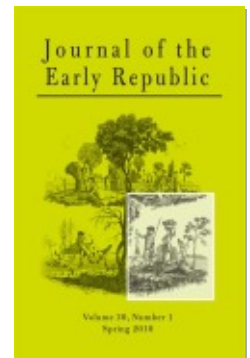


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Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and America, 1700–1830, and: *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic*, and: *Feast or Famine: Food and Drink in American Westward Expansion* (review)

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such as the different ways in which various gender–race pairings were treated. On the whole, however, Schafer has done her fellow historians an admirable service once again with her bibliography of over two hundred cases from the First District Court archive and has brought to life with rich description an understudied era in the long history of New Orleans prostitution.

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Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and America, 1700–1830. Edited by John Styles and Amanda Vickery. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006. Pp. viii, 358. Cloth, \$65.00.)

Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic. By Dell Upton. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008). Pp. x, 395. Cloth, \$45.00.)

Feast or Famine: Food and Drink in American Westward Expansion. By Reginald Horsman. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008. Pp. viii, 356. Cloth, \$39.95.)

Reviewed by Michelle Craig McDonald

The objects people selected, purchased, and used have become an important part of how historians interpret American history, whether in scholarship on metropolitan societies and their emulating colonies, or the relationship between moral economy and political action. This attention to specific goods and the individuals who acquired them, however, is relatively recent. As late as the middle of the twentieth century, consumer studies were largely subsumed within analyses of trade patterns or specific commodity industries. When individuals were considered, they were usually from society's upper classes with the means to acquire quantities and qualities of goods that those below them could envy and only occasionally imitate.

As the three books compared in this essay demonstrate, historians have begun to turn the tide. Each volume examines consumption from a different perspective, but together they span two centuries and cross the

Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and America, 1700–1830* traces the impact of consumers' choices on trans-Atlantic trade and lifestyle in the eighteenth century. *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* explores the forces behind urban development, predominantly on the East Coast, during the early republic. And *Feast or Famine: Food and Drink in American Westward Expansion* argues that diet influenced migration in the American West throughout the nineteenth century. The edited collection and two monographs share an understanding that the decisions people make about their cities, their homes, their tables, and themselves reveals as much about value systems and national or regional identity as about personal taste. More importantly, these works challenge ideas about commodities and consumption, and break down traditional "producer–distributor–consumer" patterns by offering more multidirectional models in which demands and preferences are as likely to influence production decisions as producer initiatives are to encourage buyer behavior.

Economic history as understood today is little more than a century old. Most nineteenth-century historians were interested in political developments, but by the early 1880s, they began looking for relationships among technology, state policy, and patterns in prices and wages to explain the complex, industrial societies growing around them in Western Europe. Their work depended on the business of numbers, such as production values and import and export statistics. Ralph Davis, for example, acknowledged that his pioneering comparative study *The Rise of Atlantic Economies*, "like nearly all economic history," was "grounded in statistics; for it is usually concerned with the behavior of very large numbers of people, who cannot be treated as individuals" (Ithaca, NY, 1973, p. xiii).

Yet it is precisely the social, personal, and cultural connections between objects and their users that preoccupy consumer historians today. If the geographic parameters of an Anglo–Atlantic world seem somewhat traditional in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture*, the cohorts studied in these English-speaking regions are quite different from those analyzed a generation ago and suggest a range of ways gender shaped buyer behavior and lifestyle in eighteenth-century Britain and North America. Ann Smart Martin, for example, argues that Virginia shopkeepers' accounts filled with men's names mask married women's important contributions in selecting home furnishings. These purchases were not just a

“triangulation between merchant, consumer and object” (180) but often filtered through husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers and, as such, their frequency and financial significance has been overlooked and obscured by both eighteenth-century accounting practices and historians’ literal interpretations of ledger books.

John Styles looks at transient accommodations in London lodging houses, where landlords furnished the room tenants rented and used. He found that two-thirds of such lodgers were women, as were many boardinghouse keepers, but their shared gender did not translate into similar understandings concerning rentals and their trappings. Lodging house owners tried to make their spaces attractive and competitive, but not so overly furnished as to tempt theft. Lodgers’ sense of *a priori* proprietorship over things they did not technically own but lived with, however, is evident, Styles suggests, by the frequency with which they took them when they left. He posits that such actions were more than simple robberies by exploring the justifications lodgers offered for their actions in court (65–68).

Another cluster of studies explores the intersection of consumer behavior and masculinity. Linzy Brekke-Aloise, for example, aptly notes that while existing scholarship addresses relationships between material culture and early American nationalism, “the historical and scholarly feminization of consumer culture, shopping, and fashion” has hidden from view “the way goods, particularly clothing, figured in the lives of men” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (228). George Washington and his contemporaries certainly knew how the clothes they wore influenced public perceptions, for example, and they believed that restraint in fashion conveyed similarly conservative stances on politics and economics.

The relationship between economics and citizenship is less theoretical but equally important in Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor’s study of enslaved African American women’s participation in collaborative consumption. Historians have long recognized slaves’ essential role as consumers; far from marginal, whole industries in North America and Europe, such as salt cod, pork, and textiles, depended on slaves for their profitability. But these were commodities selected and purchased primarily by slave owners for their laborers; only a handful of scholars acknowledge slaves as active consumers in their own right. Hartigan-O’Connor’s work on enslaved women’s roles as proxy shoppers in Newport, Rhode Island, and Charleston, South Carolina, does precisely that. Urban slaves might

have learned consumer language to help them carry out the daily errands of their owners, but they could also use such knowledge for their own benefit. Hannah, who belonged to Anne McKernan of Charleston, for example, demonstrated her understanding of self-fashioning when she took several outfits to help mask her identity as a runaway. Moreover, her owner thought she would have access to “many acquaintances in the city who would no doubt lend her [additional] clothes” (137). Changing who she was, or at least who she appeared to be, might have meant the difference between Hannah’s freedom and recapture. Such evidence of slaves’ independent economic activity indicates how a certain autonomy could give them some distance from their owners’ control.

While new scholarship is redefining consumers to include married women, thieving lodgers, male politicians, and enslaved women, it is also looking at a broader range of objects Americans consumed. In addition to durable goods such as furniture, cookware, or clothing, and consumables like sugar, coffee, or salt, scholarship has begun tackling the consumption of politics, taste, design, and behavior. Robert Blair St. George’s essay in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture*, for example, compares passages from novels that describe small, personal rooms, to “closets” and the books they contained in his search for evidence of the rising importance of reading as a scholarly and leisure activity in both the United States and Europe. Bernard Herman also uses architecture to measure the spread of taste, suggesting that working-class people on both sides of the Atlantic (Deptford, England, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) refashioned polite behavior for their own purposes in creating and furnishing their homes. Rather than seeing architectural style as something mandated on high and trickling down the social chain, Herman argues that taste “simultaneously privileges processes of social cohesion and social distinction” but, more importantly, was a form of power that any class could appropriate to serve its purposes (43).

Dell Upton’s *Another City* explores the same processes on a much grander scale. He focuses primarily on early republican Philadelphia, his archetypal rational city, and uses New Orleans as a foil of both the typical and the rational, suggesting that a complex web of social and cultural influences shaped the architecture of antebellum America. Builders and city planners were concerned with commercial or private zoning and architectural style to be sure, but they also sought to respond to, improve, and even control the everyday sensory experiences of city dwellers. Instead of physical spaces shaping everyday life, Upton suggests a

more dialectical model, as ideas about what cities should be influenced decisions about construction, which in turn dictated how and by whom spaces were used.

Builders' intentions often varied dramatically from how neighborhoods actually functioned. The "genteel street" that in daylight was "sorted and easily legible to passersby" ran adjacent to hidden alleyways and cellars in taverns, brothels, and dockyards. These spaces were not "simply neglected urban fringes and backsides," overlooked in the early republic urban experiment. They were, Upton argues, "an aggressive, morally and medically subversive landscape inhabited by shadowy figures determined to victimize the unwary" (105). That they were also essential in order for classes to categorize, label, and differentiate each other is obvious not only in the physical existence of such places but also in contemporary novelists' and travel writers' insistence on using one to define the physical and social parameters of the other. Upton's examinations of how these accounts used light and dark, smell and sound, as markers of decorum or debauchery are among the most engaging and important chapters of his study. Urban growth symbolized swelling populations, wealth, and national self-sufficiency, but it also sought to suppress the "stinking, filthy, crowded" (67) and cacophonous "uncouth sounds" (110) of city dwellers.

This tension between cities' creators who thought in terms of structures and institutions and the "American urbanites" who "developed active senses of themselves as individuals" addresses issues of consumer behavior on at least two levels. The most obvious, of course, is the physical consumption of land. New Orleans' population grew from just over 5,000 residents to almost 170,000 residents between 1790 and 1860, while New York increased from around 33,000 to 813,669 and Philadelphia from 44,096 to 565,529 (20). Such rapid demographic expansion translated into radical shifts of city lines as hills were flattened, swamps drained and filled, and levees constructed to create enough usable space to house the growing masses. But land creation was only the foundation for the more important, though less tangible, consumption of ideas about citizenship that, Upton suggests, undergirds early republican metropolises. Not everyone included in the above statistics successfully made the transition from city dweller to citizen. Upton's strategic use of racist cartoons parodying African Americans' efforts to adopt middle-class or elite dress and speech, for example, underscores how grids and urban improvements could be used to reinforce neighborhood boundaries that

included some and excluded others. In this sense, *Another City* demonstrates not only how cities concretized ideas about rationality and citizenship but also how such ideas concurrently influenced notions about class, ethnicity, and race as measured by behavior and living standards.

Consumer studies of reading practices, interior decoration, and urban development demand that scholars approach evidence with open minds, think creatively, and be willing to make intuitive leaps, relying as they do on different kinds of evidence and methodologies. Under such parameters even familiar foods, such as the pork, corn, and wild game that formed the daily diets of Reginald Horsman's western pioneers in *Feast or Famine*, do more than fill the stomach. Horsman's work is based on his careful culling of published diaries, letters, and memoirs rather than archival research, but he brings together short, individual entries on eating to painstakingly reconstruct what average Americans consumed in the upper Midwest, on the Oregon Trail, and during the California gold rush.

At times the material seems repetitive, in part because the meals of those Horsman studies lacked variety. For two chapters we learn that rural families pushing into the Mississippi Valley and along the Ohio river subsisted largely on pork and corn; husked corn or corn bread and bacon for breakfast, salt pork and vegetables for lunch, and leftovers for dinner (17–18, 37). Two more chapters follow fur trappers, mountain men, and the team led by Lewis and Clark in their hunt for “buffalo, elks, deer, and beaver” in an almost nationalist accounting of the bounty America and the brawn of men could provide (61). But Horsman ultimately concedes that natural resources are never as consistent as cultural adaptations, and so in 1835 Francis Chardon at Fort Clark, for example, whose men had subsisted on what they could kill for months, turned from hunting to trading with nearby Indian populations who understood seasonal shortages and had prepared accordingly.

Only when pioneers reach the Mexican Southwest, however, does Horsman deliberately turn from consumption of food to consider consumption of foodways. Americans settling in relatively unpopulated regions simply brought familiar comestibles with them, to the extent that they could locate and transport them, “but in areas where there were already sizable Hispanic populations,” he notes, “Mexican foodstuffs and Mexican styles of cooking had a major impact on the American diet” (107). Susan Magoffin's diary kept during her time on the Santa Fe Trail in 1846 offers a woman's perspective on western travel and adaptation

to new tastes and habits. Magoffin initially found “Mexican food” too “strong” but soon began to appreciate both local ingredients and cooking techniques. By 1847 she could grind her own corn and cook her own tortillas, and had begun collecting recipes to take home as “all of their dishes are so fine ’twoud be a shame,” she concluded, “not to let my friends have a taste of them too” (118–22). Nor were the dietary changes Horsman describes one-way; by the mid-1850s, William Davis, a Mexican War veteran who came to Sante Fe as a United States attorney noted that “tea, coffee, and sugar were becoming popular among the [Mexican] ‘peasantry,’” as were barley and oats (122).

While Horsman’s chapter on the American Southwest captures the consumption of new foods and cooking techniques in action, and he dutifully notes the numerous exchanges between Native Americans and migrants in both the upper Midwest and Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, he misses other opportunities to expand his analysis. He rarely mentions African Americans’ or enslaved peoples’ cookery, though significant scholarship exists to demonstrate how these shaped the American diet in important ways. Similarly, he briefly notes the number of Chinese immigrants to California mining regions by the mid nineteenth century but concludes that “Chinese customs and Chinese foods were frequently condemned” (198). Although he acknowledges that “scores of dishes” from bird’s-nest soup to fried shark’s fin could be found in San Francisco, he does not explore how these dishes were adapted to American palates, or reconstituted using local ingredients. Doing so would emphasize not only trends in food consumption but also shed light on culinary creolization.

As historians include more groups in the pantheon of purchasers and add ideas to their consideration of what could be consumed, consumers in general have been re-empowered. Homes and store counters are no longer final destinations in a linear march from production to consumption, but a kind of middle ground where what is consumed is tested and evaluated, sometimes accepted and at other times returned for redesign or refashioning. Indeed, stores and other buildings in Upton’s *Another City* become something to be consumed in their own right. Interest in and publication about consumer behavior has skyrocketed during the past two decades. Perhaps this is unsurprising; while goods have always played an important role in self-definition, our generation’s unabashed acquisition of food, clothing, housing, and technology has resulted in escalating levels of consumption financed by parallel growth in personal

debt. Since the economic bubble burst in the fall of 2008, many have had to come to terms with new standards of living, and the idea that the future might not always bring bigger and better. These lessons of the past reinforce the notion that consumption is neither a simple seller-to-buyer transaction, nor always about progress. Styles's lodgers acquired more through theft than expanding disposable income, and Hartigan-O'Connor's enslaved proxy shoppers used what they knew to express a degree of individuality within a system intended to enforce servitude and obedience. The new consumption studies are well placed to explore such individuals and the larger social, cultural, and geographic contexts in which they lived their lives, and *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture, Another City*, and, in some chapters, *Feast or Famine* strike precisely this balance. They offer a promising solution to the problem of melding micro- and macroeconomic studies as well as material and ideological worlds. Individuals and their choices appear in all three of these studies, but so too does significant investment in understanding the market forces and networks that created the options available to those making decisions.

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Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic. By Rosemarie Zagarri. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Pp. 233. Cloth, \$39.95; Paper, \$22.50.)

Reviewed by Simon P. Newman

From quite different vantage points, historians such as Susan Branson and Catherine Allgor have done a great deal to illuminate women's political activities in the early republic. Branson showed elite and some middling women participating in the cauldron of popular political activity in the excited revolutionary ferment of the 1790s, while Allgor demonstrated how leading women politicized the domestic sphere in early na-