The objects people selected, purchased, and used are an important part of how historians now interpret the Atlantic world, whether in scholarship on metropolitan society and their 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 did appear, they were usually from society’s upper echelons with the means to acquire quantities and qualities of goods that those below them could envy and only occasionally emulate.

The rise of social history broadened the field in important ways. Rather than focus on commercial trends, this generation of historians explored the means of production, both manufactured and agricultural, and traced diffusion of artefacts up and down the socio-economic scale, and from cities to towns and rural villages. Some, such as Louis Green Carr and Lorena Walsh’s pioneering study Robert Cole’s World, analysed account records painstakingly to reconstruct a single community, while British scholars like Lorna Weatherill used probate records to similar effect in considering early modern, working-class, English consumers more generally. But if class changed, other defining features of buying behaviour, including race, gender, and ethnicity, rarely did and the lines of Atlantic exchange and consumption remained decidedly Anglocentric, focusing on the impact of Europe, especially Britain, on North America.

The parameters of material culture studies of the 1980s and 1990s were influenced in no small part by the concurrent rise of Atlantic history and its emphasis on crossing national, regional, and imperial boundaries. Indeed, it is the circulation of goods, people, and ideas across and around the ocean that defined the field. Early studies traced migration, trade patterns, or specific commodities, but more recent work has focused on less tangible, but critically related, fields to consumption, such as taste and refinement, and adaptation and creolization. Like material culture studies, Anglo-Atlantic scholarship outpaced other aspects of the field until the last decade, but historians and literary scholars have begun to turn the tide and the resulting work has not only challenged ideas about what is a commodity and what can be consumed, but also
broken down the traditional ‘production-distribution-consumption’ pattern, and offered a more multi-directional model in which distributors’ and consumers’ demands and preferences were as likely to influence production decisions as producers’ advertisements were to encourage buyer behaviour.\(^5\) Most importantly, this new work broadened both the Atlantic regions and peoples considered as consumers, including Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as women, native and enslaved peoples throughout the Americas.

**From history of trade to what was traded**

Economic history as understood today is little more than a century old. Most nineteenth-century historians were more interested in political developments, but by the early 1880s began looking for relationships between technology, state policy, and patterns in prices and wages to explain the complex, industrial societies growing around them in Western Europe.\(^6\) A generation later, early twentieth-century British historians, such as George Ramsey and Walter Minchinton, applied these same principles to the study of empire. Their work depended on the business of numbers such as production values and import and export statistics, and they concluded that Atlantic trade—rather than national industry—led to the development of a modern capitalist system in Britain; their counterparts Charles Andrews and Carl Bridenbaugh suggested much the same for North America. Ralph Davis, however, was the first to consider the problem more broadly, suggesting that links between Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French commercial and colonial efforts created an Atlantic financial system that transcended the economies of individual nations or empires.\(^7\)

Commodities, and by extension those who purchased and used them, underpinned much of this work, though they most often appeared as aggregates, measured by volume and traced by trends. Table 4 of Davis’s chapter on tropical commodities exemplified this tendency. It compared estimated sugar production from Brazil, the British West Indies, and the French West Indies between 1620 and 1767 and allowed readers easily to judge relative output for various empires. But several other factors remain obscure. It is clear from these figures that Brazil first produced sugar commercially, though its involvement in the industry remained episodic over the next century and a half. Barbados led British sugar production until 1720 when it shifted to Jamaica, presumably in part because of the latter island’s larger size and population, though this must be assumed as it neither stated in the table nor surrounding narrative. It is also evident that
the French colony of Saint-Domingue surpassed production of all other individual colonies, and that of most combined, by the mid-eighteenth century though it operated within similar imperial laws, a comparable planter-class society, and the same slave-based labour system. More to the point, Davis’s table demonstrated that sugar was produced and shipped, but not where it went, to whom, or for what reasons. These questions were simply not part of his equation. Indeed, ‘like nearly all economic history,’ he acknowledged in the book’s preface, his work ‘is grounded in statistics; for it is usually concerned with the behavior of very large numbers of people, who cannot be treated as individuals.’

And yet it is precisely the social, personal, and cultural connections between objects and their users that preoccupy consumer historians today. Alternative models with stronger ties between the production of goods and their social and cultural consequences certainly preceded Davis, most notably in Harold Innis’s work on Canada’s fur and cod fishing industries. Innis developed what became known as the ‘staples theory’ which held that a dominant commodity—or staple export—fundamentally determined a region’s rate of economic development. He used the premise to explain colonial success in what he termed the ‘new countries’ of the Americas, which had abundant resources but limited labour and capital. The migration of Europeans across the Atlantic, initially tentative but increasingly supported by the discovery of new commodities that appealed to European markets, produced, Innis argued, dialectical trade economies based on metropolitan import of American staples and European exports of manufactures to fulfil colonial needs.

Staple theory did not go unchallenged. Some historians charged that its focus on exported goods directed attention away from domestic production and over-emphasized colonial reliance on Europe. Others noted the difficulty in disentangling the impact of a commodity on the system of labour that produced it. While Canadian cod fishing and fur trapping seem far removed from plantation economies, several of the characteristics of staple theory, such as small domestic markets, unskilled labour forces, low urban development, and unequal distribution of wealth had also been cited as driving forces behind the development of slave societies. Studies that followed in the footsteps of Innis produced excellent, richly textured regional histories, but less often ventured comparative analyses between regions, and while merchants and planters received more scrutiny in some of these works, the faces and motivations of individual buyers remained few and far between.
The transatlantic slave trade

Studies of the Atlantic slave trade were the glaring exception to this tendency, perhaps because the moral implications of these particular commodities, and the goods they in turn produced, made it impossible to overlook the culpability of consumers. As noted early on by British abolitionist Hannah More:

Let the Consumer remember, that he is the real Slaver owner; that it is for him, and [on]ly him that the system is kept at work: that it is out of his purse that the wages of Men-stealers, Slave Merchants, Planters, and Drivers are paid. Let the consumer, withdraw his support, and Slavery must fall.\(^{14}\)

The slave trade has also remained, perhaps not coincidentally, one historical sub-field where statistical analyses have been critically important and hotly debated. Chattel slaves were among the most profitable, and consistently demanded and consumed, goods of the Atlantic world. In the British Empire alone, at least five Africans landed in American colonies for every two Europeans between 1630 and 1780, while between 1700 and 1780 the ratio increased to four to one.\(^{15}\) Until very recently, however, historians knew much more about the smaller movement of their European counterparts, primarily because of the nature of available data. Alison Games, for example, carefully mined port registers, passenger lists, indenture contracts, and other colonial papers to recover the lives of 1,360 of the 7,507 migrants who left London in 1635. A spectacular accomplishment, it still represented less than 20 per cent of that year’s total, and relied on bookkeepers to record accurately family names, places of origin, and destinations.\(^{16}\) Those charged with keeping similar accounts for slavers were notoriously less diligent. Gender, approximate age, and regional affiliation appeared as they appealed to potential buyers who believed slaves from different parts of Africa possessed specific, valuable labour skills, such as rice cultivation, or stronger or more malleable temperaments.\(^{17}\) The motivations behind such records are thus necessarily very different than those documenting people who chose to migrate. They tended to catalogue enslaved people like other commodities, by conditions affecting saleability rather than characteristics important to identity.

This tension between individual slaves and the commodity traffic of slaving produced some of the most impassioned discussions about the place of statistics in historical study since
publication of Philip Curtin’s 1969 study *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*. Based primarily on previously published scholarship, Curtin provided the first detailed estimate of the overall volume of the slave trade between 1500 and 1867. His figure of approximately 12 million slaves departing from Africa was far lower than previously published figures and reactions took one of two forms. Some historians publicly debated the utility of aggregate data, especially in light of a trade in people. Curtin anticipated such criticism in his book’s introduction when he noted that his focus on statistical trends would necessarily dehumanize the subjects of study, and responded that ‘no possible figure from five million to fifty can make the evils of the trade any less than they were.’ These reactions, and Curtin’s responses, remain one of the best classroom teaching exercises to illustrate history as construction rather than accumulated fact.

Others responded to Curtin by focusing less on the numbers of slaves traded, than on tracing where they went and to whom. Such work on the varied places, work conditions, and social and cultural settings that enslaved people entered helped break down the monolithic structure of ‘slavery’ into ‘slaveries’ by acknowledging the variety of slave experiences in the Atlantic world. Many of these took the form of commodity studies, such as sugar, coffee, rice, and tobacco, which followed the life cycle of goods created by enslaved hands. As a result, they hold an interesting double place in transatlantic consumer studies as they not only tracked slaves, who were considered commodities, but also the articles of trade produced by plantation labour, a second tier of goods. Other studies focused on plantation owners and operators, acknowledging that such consistent and growing demand for slaves necessitated a more nuanced explication of the motivations and justifications of slaves’ consumers. The result has been a complex image of slave labour in agriculture, urban settings, maritime trades, military service, and skilled professions, as well as better analyses of those who owned them—planters and wealthy elite to be sure, but women, middling classes, state governments, and even free and freed blacks.

Meanwhile, quantification of the slave trade continued. While the number of individual slaves whose lives can be recaptured remains small, great strides have been made in historians’ understanding of how groups moved throughout the Atlantic region. One development that made this possible, of course, was the computer revolution and related explosion of archival research conducted since the late 1960s. This work, led by David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein, culminated in the publication of *The Trans-Atlantic Slave*
Trade: A Database on CD-ROM in 2000, a tremendous compilation of almost 30,000 slave ship voyages that required international collaboration, and included records from English, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, and American archives. It did not include slave names and so is of less use to those seeking to trace family lines, but it has been of incalculable utility to those concerned about the extent, significance, and influence of the slave trade market. It was also, almost certainly, the most extensive, detailed, and historiographically significant undertaking combining transatlantic trade with statistical analysis to emerge in several decades.

But if slavery was now accepted as an essential part of transatlantic history and economy, it still received less attention from historians of material culture and consumer studies. Historians have recognized slaves’ essential role as consumers; far from marginal, whole industries in North America and Europe, such as salt cod, pork and certain textiles, depended on slaves for their livelihoods. Indeed, some industries developed solely in response to slave owners’ demands, such as the Negro cloth intended as clothing for plantation field hands. But these were foods and products selected and purchased primarily by slave owners for their labourers; only a handful of scholars acknowledged enslaved peoples as active consumers in their own right. Sydney Mintz and Douglas Hall found evidence that slaves’ participated in local Jamaican markets by selling surplus provisions grown on land set aside for their sustenance on plantations. Roderick McDonald took a different tack by focusing on economic activity inside plantations. Rather than accept food, shelter, or clothing rations provided by their owners, slaves offered opinions on the quality of commodities acquired on their behalf. They also expressed preferences, and with funds earned from hiring out, selling, or bartering ground provisions and other goods, acquired both food and material possessions that reflected ethnic and religious identities, as well as individual taste. Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor’s work on women’s participation in South Carolina and Rhode Island economic activity explored enslaved and free black women’s consumer roles from proxy shoppers to Charleston market’s female higgler, slave women so prominent and successful in their retail operations that other vendors repeatedly sought legislation to control their behaviour, fearing competition from price undercutting. Such evidence of slaves’ independent economic activity indicated a certain degree of autonomy that enabled them, albeit within important limitations, to distance themselves from their owners’ control. It also encourages further study of how enslaved people used cash, barter, and consumer choice to express materially their society and culture.
Changing profile of transatlantic consumers

The incorporation of enslaved people into the field of transatlantic consumption was both exciting and path-breaking, as studies on other groups previously overlooked have followed in their wake. Daniel Richter argued that, like enslaved Africans, Native Americans were not passive consumers in their interactions with Europeans. In fact, through the mid-seventeenth century, most native peoples in eastern North America valued European goods primarily as raw materials to be refashioned and repurposed according to local tastes and needs. A kettle, for example, might be ‘prized for its copper, not for its carrying capacity’ and reworked as an ornament for a headmen’s neck to symbolize his powerful connections to European leaders. Even later, as colonies in North America grew and natives began using the goods they offered as originally intended, consumption remained imbedded in political, social, and cultural symbolism. Gift-giving was not only a central function in creating alliances, but also a key tool deployed by Indians to parlay power between British, French, and Spanish colonial authorities. As Native American scholar Kathleen DuVal suggested, ‘European goods served many purposes—religious ceremonial, decorative, protective, subsistence, political—for various peoples, places and times.’ An object’s ‘usefulness is’, after all, she concluded, ‘in the eye of the consumer.’

Gender has also been resuscitated. John Styles and Amanda Vickery’s recent volume explored how gender shaped taste and material culture in eighteenth-century Britain and North America. And if the geographic parameters of an Anglo-Atlantic world seem traditional, the kinds of people populating this English-speaking region are very different than those in studies done 20 years ago. Ann Smart Martin, for example, argued that Virginia shopkeepers’ accounts filled with men’s names mask the important contributions of married women in selecting home furnishings. Women’s purchases were not just a ‘triangulation between merchant, consumer and object’ but often filtered through husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers and, as such, their frequency and financial significance have been obscured by strictly literal interpretations of eighteenth-century accounting practices. And lest gender be defined as solely female, another cluster of studies in the volume explored the intersection of consumer behaviour and masculinity. Linzy Brekke-Aloise aptly noted that several existing scholars address relationships between material culture and early American nationalism, but that ‘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. George Washington and his contemporaries were certainly conscious of how they crafted their public figures, and held that restraint in fashion conveyed similarly conservative stances on politics and economics.\textsuperscript{28} Perhaps the best-known book on male consumption is Michael Zakim’s \textit{Ready-Made Democracy}, an examination of the rise of the men’s ready-made clothing industry in nineteenth-century America. Homespun garments tied the productive efforts of the household to those of the nation, and became one of the most tangible expressions of colonial self-reliance. But over the next century of industrialization, the mass-produced suit—inefficient, consistent, and accessible—became an equally powerful symbol for the rise of democratic capitalism, and a new geographically and socially mobile middle class.\textsuperscript{29}

The objects being consumed have changed as well. Commodities continue to receive significant scholarly and popular attention today. But, unlike commodity studies of the past, which focused on production or distribution, recent commodity studies are hybrids of history, economics, social geography, material culture, and cultural studies that ask where goods travelled, how they moved, in what quantities, who wanted them and, most elusive of all, why were they desirable. Relieved of their roles as mere economic cargoes or anthropological artefacts, commodities—and their circulation and consumption—have gained a new lease of life where, as cultural anthropologist Daniel Miller has noted in his recent book \textit{Material Culture: Why Some Things Matter}, the ‘social is as much constituted by materiality as the other way around’.\textsuperscript{30}

So now, in addition to such durable standards as furniture, cookware, or clothing, or even consumables like sugar, coffee, or codfish, scholarship has tackled the transatlantic consumption of politics, taste, design, and behaviour. Robert Blair St-George, for example, compared passages from novels with small, personal rooms, or ‘closets’, and the books they contained. His analysis of libraries and other domestic reading spaces in New England homes is one of several studies that examine the rising importance of reading as a scholarly and leisure activity in both the United States and Europe. Julius Scott, a Caribbean historian, also studied the spread of ideas, though of a decidedly more politicized nature. His essay ‘The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution’ offers a detailed and thoughtful critique of enslaved populations’ appropriation of French revolutionary rhetoric both in the French colony of Saint-Domingue and elsewhere throughout the Atlantic world.\textsuperscript{31}
Such studies of consumers and that which they consumed demand that scholars approach evidence with open minds, with a certain degree of creativity, and a willingness to make intuitive leaps. Weaving together narratives about slave clothing preferences, for example, might mean reading planters’ correspondence against the grain, to disentangle what slaves desired from what their owners thought they wanted or should have wanted, and comparing this information with a handful of accounts in travel narratives, satirical prints, or private sketches, and perhaps one amazing sample book for cloth created for the African trade in an archive in Madrid. This is fundamentally different evidence than the port records or Naval Office Shipping Lists on which consumption studies were previously based, and at times the lens of contemporary inquiry narrows to one city, one storekeeper, and even one object. It should not be surprising, then, that as consumers become more diverse and individual, historians’ evidence for them becomes more narrative than statistical.

**Changing direction of transatlantic consumption**

As historians acknowledged a broader pantheon of purchasers, consumers in general were re-empowered. Homes and store counters were no longer final destinations in a linear march from production to consumption, but a kind of middle ground where what was consumed was tested and evaluated, sometimes accepted, and at other times returned for redesign or refashioning. Sidney Mintz first approached consumption as the natural outgrowth to his work on Caribbean production, but quickly realized that the problem was not nearly as straightforward as he had imagined. Consumer historians noted sugar’s increasing popularity over centuries ‘without regard to where the sugar came from’, while labour and production historians were just as guilty of failing to follow ‘where the tropical products go, who uses them, for what, and how much they are prepared to pay for them’. It was not sufficient to line processes up as they might appear in chronological sequence because, especially in imperial studies, doing so led to the unsatisfying tendency for metropoles to appear as refined consumers and outlying colonies as raw product producers, when the relationship was in reality far messier.

Instead, Mintz began to puzzle over what ‘demand’ really was and to what extent it could be considered natural. He also re-examined words like ‘taste’, ‘preference’, and even ‘good’, and interrogated how they worked. Just because sugar was sweet did not necessarily mean, in other words, that it would become desirable. Instead, production and consumption operated under a
larger rhetoric of power—power over taste, demand access, and certainly over labour, because if a commodity’s existence did not necessarily ensure its popularity, control over the means of production at least ensured it would exist and have a chance to become so. It is how things were used, where, and by whom, he concluded, that imbued them with social meaning and made them worth acquiring.

Almost a decade passed before the question of consumption’s relationship to production arose so explicitly again, this time in Cary Carson’s extended chapter ‘The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand’. Carson’s footnotes alone make the piece worth reading, as he painstakingly recounted how different historical sub-disciplines noted increasing consumption during the eighteenth century, and summarized each historiography with extended annotation. Economic historians looked at the rise of durable goods, and literary scholars at books, pamphlets, and sermons on luxury and its denigrating effects. Art historians counted the number of portraits and paintings that not only appeared with greater frequency in the homes of middling families, but also depicted changes in the lifestyles in their foregrounds and backgrounds. Cultural historians pointed to the proliferation of etiquette literature to guide the newly initiated in the arts of social behaviour and proper use of the trappings of gentility, and architectural historians to the diffusion of pattern books that promoted consistent versions of classical architecture just as vernacular building styles declined in popularity. There was, in other words, a perfect storm of commodities, behaviour, and standardization that seemed to portray consumers as uneducated masses desperate both for acquisition and proper instruction.

But this would be confusing the symptoms for the underlying cause. Each of these literatures very clearly outlined important changes in transatlantic consumption—and even the preconditions that made such changes possible—during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but fewer speculated about why these changes occurred when they did. They assumed that increases in disposable income necessarily lead to greater spending, a presentist viewpoint if every there was one. Instead, Carson suggested that consumer trends reflected both a growing distinction between living standard (literally, how one lived) and lifestyle (a cohesive force uniting like-minded people to reaffirm their similarities), as well as a growing number of people who presented themselves and behaved in ways more class- than culture-bound. Underlying these assumptions, however, was careful attention to demography; Carson returned again and
again to the notion that changes in living standards depended on a critical population mass, a group against which individuals measured themselves and by whom they were judged. In so doing, he recombined consumer studies with the best statistical analyses that social history had to offer. Admittedly most of this quantification appeared in the chapter’s footnotes so as not to disrupt narrative flow, but they did appear. So too did recognition of material culture’s value in filling documentary voids. While Carson described its significance primarily in terms of class, authors cited in earlier segments of this essay used goods just as effectively for other markers of identity. As Leora Auslander more recently noted, including material culture expands ‘the range of our canonical resources’ and ‘will provide better answers to familiar historical questions as well as change the very nature of the questions we are able to pose and the kind of knowledge we are able to acquire.’ If there was one critique of Carson’s framework, it was its steadfast adherence to North America and Britain, but perhaps this is unfair given the parameters of the book in which it appeared; even he gestured towards the need to appreciate ‘the true internationalist character’ of consumer changes. His model not only advocated understanding larger phenomena through the lens of individuals, but also demanded that such connections remained explicit and defined, rather than stated in an introduction and assumed for the rest of the piece.

**New directions**

The history of transatlantic consumption is uniquely poised to explore both individuals and the larger social, cultural, and geographic contexts in which they lived their lives. Consequently, it seems a promising solution to the problem of melding micro- and macroeconomic studies, as both are necessary to describe developments that take place before and after changes in consumer patterns. Economic historians, after all, are used to analysing events in stages of growth and development. Cultural historians are less so. But cultural historians have redefined the nature of evidence and its relationship to argument, and in this way have liberated historians facing topics that do not come with extensive, well-ordered records spanning decades.

So what might some future topics look like that bridge these traditional disciplinary divides and explore less charted regions of the field? Three possibilities come to mind. The first revisits the concept of barter, a well-explored topic in early modern society which all but disappears in scholarship by the mid-eighteenth century and certainly by the early nineteenth
century. Recent work indicates, however, that non-cash transactions persisted well into the
nineteenth century in urban centres as well as rural towns, indicating that consumption remained
more complicated than a simple monetary transaction might lead one to believe. It often involved
something given, either another good, time, or skill in the form of a service provided, for
something gained. Thinking of consumption in this context makes each purchase part of a larger
complex web of decisions and social agreements.

In today’s age of ebay and craigslist, second-hand goods seem another obvious choice for
melding individual consumer choice with market trends and forces. As Wendy Woloson
convincingly demonstrated in her article ‘In Hock: Pawning in Early America’, whole industries
developed to cater to those purchasing used goods, as pawnbrokers, auctioneers, and even
privateers aided in their recirculation between empires, cities, and social classes. In fact, most of
the goods North Americans purchased before the Civil War had passed through the hands of at
least one previous owner. Woloson weaves together individual stories of those down on their
luck to recreate what was an essential way to obtain ready cash for everyone but the privileged
few, and ‘was therefore a mainstream economic activity’. These small, short-term cash loans
provided by pawnbrokers supplemented labourers’ insufficient wages, and reinforced the
industrial capitalist system within which they operated. Historians’ inclination to separate the
‘marginal’ from the ‘mainstream’, and couch consumption in terms of modern-day new and
disposable goods has downplayed this interconnectedness.39

Finally, a new economic/cultural consumer history might link the study of things to one
central historical problem. Indeed, some already are. Instead of a more traditional commodity life
cycle, Brian Schoen uses cotton to understand the intersection of Southern cultural identity and
moral economy. Similarly, David Hancock’s book on Madeira is more than the story of one
wine; it traces the origins of globalization and market differentiation back to the seventeenth
century. And my own work, still in progress, argues that Americans’ reliance on coffee—both
for domestic consumption and re-export—created a regional economic dependence on first the
Caribbean and then Latin America through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Individuals
and their choices appear in all of these studies, but so too does significant investment in
understanding the market forces and networks which created the options in which such decisions
were exercised.40
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