The Other Tea Party:  
Material Desire and the Materiality of Identity

A selection of commodities circulated between, and therefore connected, the Atlantic and Pacific [1. MAP] – commodities that increasingly from the eighteenth century forward lured Europeans eastward and formed the basis of trade. These products were not, however, operating in an isolated marketplace. There were also the tensions and paradoxes that shaped the Atlantic World during this same time period – the rise of empires and resistance to them; an Age of Enlightenment and an Age of Revolution. It was also a time when women were being cast in new roles as moral counterweights in relation to burgeoning middle-class consumption while also at the center of growing anxiety over (real or imagined) materialism.

In the eighteenth-century, Philadelphia was a hub of Chinese culture (as were Salem and Boston), and Chinese products, including teas, silks, porcelain, and cloth became part of the social milieu of colonial and post-Revolutionary Philadelphia. In fact, the Empress of China [2. Empress of China, 1784], the first American ship to sail to China from the
new nation was supposed to have sailed out of Philadelphia but due to the fact that the Delaware River was frozen in February 1784, the ship sailed out of New York harbor. (Although slow to join in the China trade, New York City did gradually become a primary port of entry.) And thus the China Trade was born!

Responding to this “craze” were Western merchants who, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, imported millions of pieces of porcelain in order to cater to the European princes and aristocrats passionate to possess the Chinese ware. (Really, “millions”? Sources cite, in fact, between 60-70 million pieces!) Of considerable importance at the same time was what currency Western merchants were to use to pay for their purchases of porcelain and other Chinese wares. Europe and America had little to offer the Chinese that they did not already have or even want, except for silver, which came predominately from mines in colonial South America. What was the lure for North Americans? And how did they pay for their purchases?

I therefore begin with a little bit about the “story” of silver – silver that came out of Spain’s colonies in the New World and poured into China – because it was the “link between the Atlantic world and the Asian trade that had been identified as
the starting point for a truly global economy in the sixteenth century”.¹ In other words, silver was “[the] singular product most responsible for the birth of world trade”. Accordingly, this “birth” came about after both the Portuguese and the Spanish arrived in Southeast Asia – albeit via different routes – but routes nonetheless that established a regular and lasting connection between four major continents. (The Portuguese sailed down the West African coast, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, crossed the Indian Ocean, and set up initial operations in the Spice Islands of Southeast Asia while the Spanish rounded Cape Horn and then crossed the Pacific to get to the Philippines.) And the date of this “birth”? June 1571 – the year the city of Manila was founded – as “Manila was the crucial entrepôt linking substantial, direct, and continuous trade between America and Asia for the first time in history”.²

Although the early modern production and distribution of silver in the West has received sufficient scholarly attention, it is curious to note that the world’s biggest customer, China, “is routinely eliminated from the story.”³ Yet, a focus on silver, and

¹ Armitage, 16.
² Flynn and Giráldez “Born with a ‘Silver Spoon’” 201
³ ibid., 207.
therefore China, “is crucial … to understand the underlying motivation of world trade: it was the elevated value of silver inside China that created the opportunities for profit around the globe.”

However, the elevated value of silver was not due to any calculated effort on the part of the Europeans but rather from within the Chinese silver market itself: Chinese demand, which was met by Spain through its mines in South America and by Japan. And why the demand? Because China had evolved from using paper money to silver as the preferred currency – a transition that arose out of the fact that they had over-issued paper to the extent that, as a medium of financial exchange, it had basically become worthless by the middle of the 15th century. Gold was too valuable for day-to-day exchanges but there was silver as well as copper to consider. Copper soon was ruled out since, to assay the weight of copper coins for some sense of purity meant that the coins had to be melted, and therefore rendered useless. Silver, however, did not have to be melted to be assayed, so it became the coin of choice, and it was not long before all taxes were to be paid in silver. Thus, if we consider that the citizens of China in the late 16th century

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4 ibid., 206-7.
already amounted to about one-fourth of the world’s population, “with urban centers of up to 1 million inhabitants, then the ‘silverization’ of China” would have “had global ramifications.”

Even before the Empress of China sailed for China in 1784, North Americans were not unaware of China and the Chinese. Indeed, the American Revolution had been a turning point for the trade in Chinese porcelain imported to North America [3. Chinese export plate, mid-18th C.] as the newly independent United States dramatically increased the amount of Chinese export porcelain coming into the continent. (Early in the Revolution, Benjamin Franklin alluded to the British Empire as a “‘fine and noble China vase’”⁶; after the Revolution, Franklin again employed the metaphor but now the vase was “firmly mended”⁷ – this time he was referring to the newly independent Thirteen Colonies!) And the men who financed the Empress of China were also well aware of the established market in North America for goods from China.

⁵ ibid., 208.
⁶ Aldridge 91
⁷ Mudge 164
In the eighteenth century, China was already a source for tea and silk, and by mid-century, North American colonists had made significant purchases of “Chinese Chippendale” furniture [4. Chinese Chippendale chairs] – a very popular style, especially for bedrooms, with designs based on actual Chinese examples – Chinese wallpaper [5. Chinoiserie wallpaper], and porcelain [6. Chinoiserie plate]. This interest in things Chinese, however, was not just a North American colonial phenomena but reflective of a broader stylistic language known as Chinoiserie. As outlined above, international trade was expanding and there was an increasing influx of and desire for Asian luxury goods – Indian cotton textiles, Chinese lacquer, the afore-mentioned furniture, silks, and wallpaper – among eighteenth-century Europeans and their American counterparts who could afford them. It was not long before Western designers responded with whimsical, Chinese-inspired designs for architecture and interior decoration.

Tea and porcelain had been long-time colonial-era imports, and tea continued to be a major import into the United States, but there were also plenty of other goods coming into American ports as well – the number of which, from where they came [7a.
det., Meissen coffee pot], the specifics of monies owed, is the often the focus of scholarly attention to the trade and burgeoning consumerism of eighteenth-century colonial America but from a material culture perspective, these analyses say little about what Phyllis Hunter, in her book, Purchasing Identity in the Atlantic World: Massachusetts Merchants, 1670-1780, described as “the cultural effects” on the people, the merchants and their workers and the folks who came to buy, such as “the processes of gathering, packing, valuing, loading/unloading, buying, selling, and accounting for vast quantities of goods, from piles of timber to well-fashioned chests of drawers, from barrels of molasses to pints of rum, from chests of tea to porcelain cups”. 8 [7b. cups] It was not long before this society developed “a culture that emphasized the value of material objects in defining self and creating community”. 9

Not only were there more and more goods available for purchase but there were also more and more choices: what color, what size did one want? How many? The “language of

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8 Hunter 4
9 ibid
consumption” was developing and it was becoming “increasingly complex”\textsuperscript{10}, which in turn made consumers increasingly exacting. This had an additional effect in that as merchants met demand, consumers figured out that they could demand more. “[T]ea kettles, wearing linen, silver spoons, coats and hats, tablecloths, iron boxes, a coffee mill, a pewter basin, a pair of stays, a calico gown, a necklace, a silk waistcoat, a scarlet long coat, … black silk stocking and two pair of pumps”\textsuperscript{11} – all part of an anonymously published list of goods that were cumulatively stolen by a gang but also goods, in their diversity, that reflect the increasingly available choices in the market. Ironically, consumers thereby also “created [their] own criminal class”.\textsuperscript{12} Canny thieves soon developed an appreciation – both visually/aesthetically and financially – for the new goods coming in from China, England, and elsewhere. One author even recounts the tale of a thief who went from house to house as a peddler, using “his conversations with customers to observe ‘how Windows and Doors were fastened’ ”.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Brewer 252
\textsuperscript{11} ibid., 253
\textsuperscript{12} ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} ibid.
And then there was the role men and women took in fashioning their own social identities [8. Anon., *At the Cafe, 1780*]. In the eighteenth century, an increased interest in clothing and manners emerged concurrently with issues and notions of “taste” (a topic for another time and place) – or what, by the mid-eighteenth century, became a new scholarly discourse known as “aesthetics” – and cloth was a major British import. (With regard to taste, Richard Bushman in *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* describes how taste was honored as a virtue and therefore appropriated by the gentlemen of the eighteenth century as a way to distinguish themselves from common men.) “[B]right stripes and colourful prints, especially the lighter weight textiles, were quickly transformed into garments. Indeed, dress was the most sensitive index to fashion”.14 This is a very important point with broad and international ramifications because already there were increasing anxieties over the failure of clothing to act as an indicator of class and social respectability [9. Chardin *Return from the market, 1739*]. As consumer markets (and by extension, industrial production) expanded, which included the

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14 ibid., 255
international cloth and garment industry, high fashion clothing and materials (e.g., certain Chinese silks, Indian cottons) also became more widely available to those who could afford them.

For example, I am reminded here of the eighteenth-century painting by Jacques-André Joseph Aved, *Portrait of Madame Brion, Seated, Taking Tea, 1750*. It is a portrait wherein the material culture objects depicted speak directly to the woman’s status as well as to aspects of the status of global trade. Here, Madame Brion sits before us with an assortment of possessions that tell us about her. On the mantle to the left is a Chinese *blanc de chine* cup in the form of a rhinoceros horn and to the right is a Kangxi covered jar. This type of jar would serve as a model for European and American tobacco jars. Peeking down from the top of the painting and just above the Kangxi jar is the bottom part of a wall sconce decorated with leaves and flowers. The flowers are Vincennes porcelain—an early French royal porcelain manufactory. And while Madame is shown with a tea bowl and saucer, the size of each is too large to be Chinese or even Japanese and the painted design is not recognizably Asian. But since she has an appreciation for porcelain, the artist included his own pseudo-Asian version of these kinds of pieces.
Indeed, much about the depiction of Madame in this room is meant to evoke exotic Eastern cultures in that the cloth on the table is imported Indian cotton with either white or more likely, silver, thread running through it, and the damask wallpaper with a curvilinear foliate design is reminiscent of a tradition of Middle Eastern textiles that came from Damascus (and hence, the name). And while the title tells us she is drinking tea, as the imagined tea bowl and saucer would also support, she may not be as the silver pot on the table is not a teapot but a flat-bottomed style of coffeepot called a marabout and used to serve the thick Turkish coffee then in vogue with the French.

While Madame Brion may be a French example rather than a specifically Colonial American one, the painting can still serve as an example nonetheless about how one’s possessions, like dress, could certainly complicate if not actually disguise rather than reveal rank. Indeed, back in North America, one author mentions that “young people of Boston… challenged… social and moral conventions” and many consumers were purchasing yards and “yards of brightly coloured cloth”.15 Indeed, just yesterday Dara mentioned the blue “Indian cotton” brought back

15 ibid.
by the sea captain to one of the aunt’s in Madeline Wynn’s *The Little Room*. (1895 novel)

[James Whistler, *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen and the Six Marks, 1864*] In closing, it was my intention to highlight a selection of commodities coming into Colonial America and their use. I wanted to understand the origins of the material desires of newly minted “Americans” and how, as newly independent, these American men and women crafted their social identities vis-à-vis a selection of objects that circulated between, and therefore also connected, the Atlantic and Pacific. For North American elites, the lure of porcelain was the potential in its possession for cultural transformation.