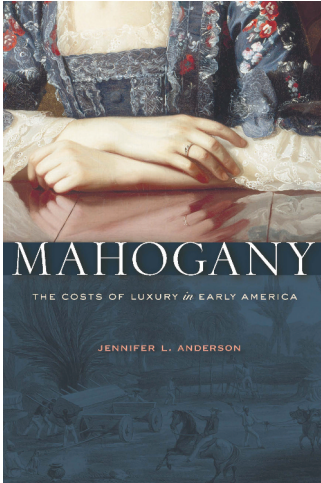


January 2014

**Reading Guide: *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America*,
by Jennifer L. Anderson (2012)**

1. Throughout *Mahogany*, Anderson seeks to bring the social and environmental histories of mahogany into a single narrative. Does she succeed in crafting a story that links the imperial, natural, and cultural aspects of mahogany? Can you point to a particular instance in which these attributes of mahogany coincide? Is this a particularly useful or even necessary method of investigating her topic?
2. What were the environmental consequences of harvesting mahogany, and what impact did this have beyond the forests of the Americas?
3. If mahogany “followed a very different trajectory” (7) than other tropical commodities, is Anderson’s examination simply a unique story or does the story of mahogany contribute to a larger understanding of imperial resource extraction and the commercial/consumer revolution?
4. In today’s society, many of the products we consume are produced using what is now understood to be slave labor. As such, we are typically unaware or unwilling to confront that we are consuming slave-made goods. In an interesting parallel, it seems that most early Americans were not thinking of the bloody cost that their mahogany pieces engendered. What was the role of enslaved Africans in the harvesting of mahogany? Did this surprise you, or perhaps alter the way you look at the wood itself?
5. Why was mahogany so desired? How and why did this change over the course of Anderson’s investigation? Why do you think it is still desired today, and how does that relate to the past?
6. Anderson refers to mahogany’s position as a luxury material as “a cultural construct” (15). What does this mean, and do you buy it? Does it influence how you view what is considered refined or luxurious?
7. This is certainly a book about mahogany, but—like all great historical studies—it has larger implications. What does Anderson, using a particular commodity like mahogany, in fact reveal about life, labor, empire, society, or culture in Early America?
8. On the last page of the book, Anderson perceptively notes that mahogany pieces are not merely “objects of desire” but “also objects of memory” (315). What does she mean by this? Is it important for us to make the stories we tell in museums more representative of the true historical reality, including the often gruesome past of New World slavery?

About Jennifer L. Anderson

Jennifer L. Anderson is Associate Professor of History at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. She received her Ph.D. from New York University in 2007, completing her dissertation on which *Mahogany* was based. As an Atlantic historian, Anderson examines the complex relationships (social, economic, and political) that developed among the Americas, Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean in the early modern period. Anderson has also conducted extensive research and consulted on the history and interpretation of slavery in North America. Before joining the History faculty at Stony Brook, she worked as a museum curator, exhibition developer, and historical consultant at numerous historic sites and museums throughout greater New York. Anderson continues to serve as an advisor or consultant to many historical and cultural organizations.

Other Scholarly Works by Jennifer L. Anderson (in order of their publication)

“The Card Family and the Mahogany Trade: From New England to the Bay of Honduras,” *New England and the Caribbean*, ed. Peter Benes (Dublin Seminar for New England Folk Life, 2012), pp. 15–32.

“New England Merchants and the Circum-Caribbean Slave Trade,” in *Paths of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Interactions, Identities, and Images*, ed. Ana Lucia Araujo (Cambria Press, 2011), 21–48.

“Better Judges of the Situation: Environmental Realities & Problems of Imperial Authority in the Bay of Honduras,” *Itinerario*, special issue: “Geographies of Empire,” 30: 3 (2006), pp. 55–75.

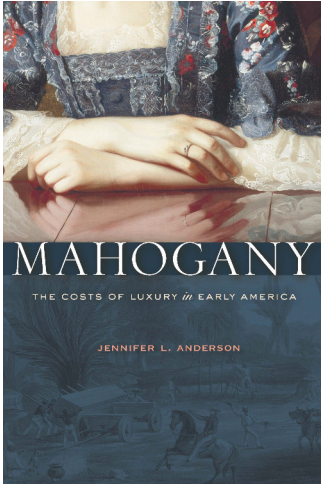
“Nature’s Currency: The Atlantic Mahogany Trade and the Commodification of Nature in the Eighteenth Century,” *Early American Studies*, 2:1 (Spring 2004), pp. 47–80.

Related Works

Bushman, Richard. *Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*. New York: Vintage, 1993. | One of the most important works on America’s material culture, *Refinement of America* reveals that the quest for taste and manners in America has been essential to the serious pursuit of a democratic culture. Richard L. Bushman shows how a set of values originating in aristocratic court culture gradually permeated almost nearly stratum of American society, effectively preventing the hardening of class consciousness.

Hancock, David. *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009. | One of the finest works on a single commodity’s influence on history, this innovative book examines how, between 1640 and 1815, the Portuguese Madeira wine trade shaped the Atlantic world and American society.

Johnson, Walter. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012. | Within this bold and important work, Walter Johnson places the Cotton Kingdom at the center of worldwide webs of exchange and exploitation that extended across oceans and drove an insatiable hunger for new lands.



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