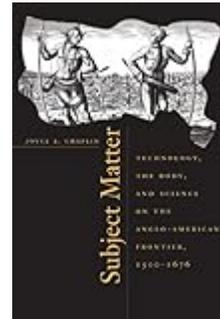


# H-Net Reviews

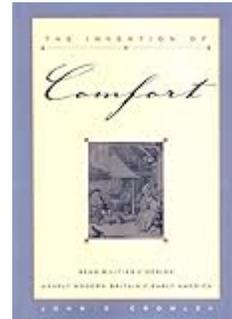
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Joyce E. Chaplin.** *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500-1676.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. ix + 411 pp. \$29.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-01122-9.



**John E. Crowley.** *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities and Design in Early Modern Britain and Early America.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xi + 361 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6437-7.



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The idea that the human body is as much a socio-cultural construct as it is a physical entity came to academic prominence in the late 1980s, growing out of the widespread dissemination of Foucault's ideas of sexuality and "bio-power," and gaining foundational importance in the broadening of women's studies into "queer" studies and the study of gender and sexuality.[1] Historicized enquiry regarding ideas about the body was soon incorporated into the field of Atlantic history, whose emphasis upon the encounters of Europeans, Africans, and the indigenous peoples of the Americas proved fertile ground for theoretically and anecdotally rich studies of the reactions of one group to the corporeal reality of others. The bodies of slaves were marked as sites of economic production and biological reproduction, and the entire

system of slavery and white supremacy came to center upon visible and invisible physiological differences between the races. Ideas regarding bodily difference were employed to mark Europeans as superior beings and to uphold forced labor, justify sexual abuse and savage punishment, and maintain systems of legal and political dominance.[2]

Despite the recent efflorescence of scholarship on the subject of the historical understanding of the bodies of particular individuals or groups, the history of the body has not located itself at the heart of the historiography of the early modern Atlantic world.[3] The simultaneous appearance of two substantial monographs, Joyce Chaplin's *Subject Matter* and John Crowley's *The Invention of*

*Comfort*, brings debates about the nature, meaning, and mutability of the human body to center stage.

In *Subject Matter*, Chaplin explores the “transatlantic argument on the connection between the natural and imperial worlds” (p. 3). The problem upon which she focuses is the manner and methods by which English colonizers came to understand the physiological differences between themselves and the indigenous Americans they encountered, first in the Canadian Arctic and subsequently in the Chesapeake. Chaplin traces the contours of the Anglo-American encounter from the beginnings of contact through the crucial year of 1676, which saw major conflicts between colonizers and native peoples in Virginia (Bacon’s Rebellion) and New England (King Philip’s War). In doing so, she recounts a story in which Europeans move from viewing Indian bodies and technology as ideally suited to the New World environment to regarding native bodies as excessively delicate and indigenous technology (*artes*, in the phrase of that other Bacon, Francis) as poorly adapted to the demands of America’s climate and landscape, as evidenced by their apparent failure to resist European diseases or to present any serious competition to the colonizers in terms of agriculture, weaponry, or material culture. According to Chaplin’s analysis, by the final quarter of the seventeenth century English colonizers had achieved so much, in terms of building up resistance to the American disease environment and in relation to adapting and adopting technology to suit their colonial existence, that they had come to take as an article of faith that they were the natural inhabitants of America, and thus had not only the ability but the duty to establish and maintain dominion over the faulty bodies of the natives. As English bodies had proven their greater hardihood and skill in comparison with those of the Indians, it was now their self-appointed task to remold the colony’s agriculture, society, and governance along English lines; in the words of Richard Eburne’s *A Plain Pathway to Plantations* (1624), “it be the people that makes the land English, not the land the people” (p. 153).

Chaplin’s aim is to illuminate the development of the Englishmen’s idea that their bodies and technologies had decisively proved their superiority to those of the Indians. This apparent superiority allowed, and even mandated, that the colonists supplant the Indians in possession, cultivation, and governance of the lands of the New World. In doing so, she simultaneously attempts to forge an enduring link between the fields of ethnohistory and intellectual history, pushing the former to problematize the role of Europeans and prodding the latter to move

beyond its traditional concern, particularly in relation to the study of the early modern period, with issues of politics and religion. This is an intensely ambitious task, one requiring the mastery of two vast and ever-expanding historiographies and the ability to interpret two disparate and competing sets of mental and physical worlds. Considering the magnitude of this endeavor, it is perhaps not surprising that Chaplin is less than entirely successful in its performance. Although the monograph’s goals are kept in sight throughout the work, there are moments in which it feels less like a unified study and more like a series of loosely connected essays. Some of the individual chapters, particularly that on military intelligence and technology, are splendid, moving adroitly across the frontiers of early modern Europe and the Americas and drawing fascinating examples from a dizzying variety of sources. Other sections work less well; that on “technology versus idolatry” is equally wide-ranging, but fails to link its series of intriguing anecdotes into a coherent structure. Chaplin’s prose is rarely less than lucid, but in places she succumbs to wordiness, making sections of her argument into too much of a good thing. She makes only passing mention of Tzvetan Todorov’s seminal *The Conquest of America* (1984), which intriguingly juxtaposes Spanish and Aztec ideas of bodily and technological superiority, and which could potentially have made a useful foil for her study of North America. But these flaws do not significantly undercut the success of the monograph as a whole; one closes the covers of *Subject Matter* impressed by Chaplin’s erudition and exhilarated by the range of her intellectual ambition.

In Chaplin’s formulation, human bodies exist in an entirely instrumental way: they labor, reproduce, kill, or are killed. To John Crowley, the body is of interest not for what it does, but how it feels—his bodies might be described as owner-occupied. The very title of *The Invention of Comfort* and its subtitle of *Sensibilities and Design* allow the reader to realize that, although Crowley shares Chaplin’s concern with the relationship between the body and its physical environment, his conception of that environment is very different from hers, focusing as it does not on climate and topography, but on material culture. Essentially, Crowley’s aim is to investigate the ways by which early modern English people and, to a lesser extent, English settlers overseas “gave increasing priority in their consumption patterns to domestic enhancements that provided more privacy, cleanliness, warmth, and light,” the four elements which, in his view, yield comfort, or “self-conscious satisfaction with the relationship between one’s body and its immediate physi-

cal environment” (p. ix).

Crowley invites his readers to follow him upon an engaging and meticulously detailed tour of the living spaces of English people across the socio-economic spectrum as they moved from a mentality in which social status outweighed personal physical comfort to one in which a home capable of permitting its inhabitants to adjust their levels of cleanliness, temperature, lighting, and proximity to one another emerged as the ideal for everyone from the cottager to the countess. Such a story might seem to be entirely Whiggish in tone, a triumphal progress from medieval squalor to modern amenity. Crowley, however, is firmly committed to a relativist approach to the material past, and regularly reminds the reader that current Western ideals of pleasant and healthy domestic life are far from universal, as “architects have felt it difficult to specify, much less to design, a uniformly comfortable environment” (p. ix). In his view, the elements which denoted “comfort” to early modern Anglo-Americans were produced by a specific set of historical circumstances and constrained by, in Fernand Braudel’s phrase, “the limits of the possible.”

As a specific example of these possibilities and limitations, Crowley offers the transition from the open, central hearth, which typified the medieval European domestic space, to the chimney, which reduced smoke and allowed for the development of “closets,” small, defined spaces in which an individual could engage in pious or secular activities without sacrificing privacy for warmth. Crowley emphasises the ways in which the seemingly dark, smoky, and crowded medieval hall was actually quite well-suited to its inhabitants’ activities and preferences; the principal indoor leisure activities, such as chess and singing, had no need for bright light, and ideals of hospitality valued group social interaction over intimate conversation. To Crowley, it is clear that Le Corbusier was correct in stating that form follows function; as social forms and values changed, technology yielded alternatives which accommodated these new ideals.

The early chapters of *The Invention of Comfort* are delightful: wide-ranging, lively, and replete with well-chosen illustrations. However, as the book moves towards the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it begins to lose some of its force and focus. Crowley’s analyses of eighteenth-century debates over the nature of luxury and necessity, and the emergence of “comfort” as the ideal balance between the two, are concise and insightful, but his extensive discussions of specific technologies of stoves and lamps seem to be celebrating

these innovations for their own sake, rather than connecting their development and elaboration to the needs and desires of those who bought and used them. Considerably more problematic is Crowley’s attempt to expand his analysis to include English domestic spaces overseas, in North America, the Caribbean, India, and Australia. His desire to move beyond a “little England” perspective is laudable, but, in striking contrast to Chaplin, he seems to be unaware of or uninterested in the question of why and how colonists transferred their ideals of the domestic environment from England to the colonies. If colonists found that English-style houses were poorly suited to the climate of Barbados or India, why were they averse to adopting the housing traditions of the indigenous peoples? Clearly, “comfort” extended beyond the boundaries of the physical body and contained emotional and political meanings, but Crowley fails to articulate or elaborate upon this crucial idea in the context of colonialism. Thus, his work on the English overseas is considerably less satisfying than the earlier discussions of changing English norms and values regarding the domestic environment.

Crowley’s book is beautifully produced and meticulously researched; it is easy to imagine that it would be an ideal source to draw upon in preparing lectures about or describing the material background of early modern England. Just as importantly, Crowley’s frequent reiteration of the culturally constructed nature of bodily satisfaction is an idea which scholars of intercultural encounters are well advised to keep before them. In the end, though, *The Invention of Comfort* is less intellectually satisfying than *Subject Matter*, and, despite the former’s narrower focus on the body’s needs, desires, and attributes, it fails to make as convincing a case as Chaplin’s work does for the continuing importance of the physical and imagined human body as the crossroads of gender, nation, race, and culture.

#### Notes

[1]. Foucault articulated these ideas in his three-volume *History of Sexuality* (English ed., 1978, 1988); they were extended and interpreted by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[2]. See, for example, Jennifer L. Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder’: Male Travellers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1700,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3:54 (1997): pp. 167-192; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Ma-*

*ternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Philip D. Morgan, "British Encounters with Africans and African-Americans, circa 1600-1780," in *Strangers Within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*, eds. Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

[3]. Recent work on the history of the body in the

early modern Atlantic world includes Janet Moore Lindman and Michele Lise Tarter, eds., *A Center of Wonders: The Body in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Simon P. Newman, "Reading the Bodies of Early American Seafarers," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3:55 (1998): pp. 59-82; and Kay Dian Kriz, "Curiosities, Commodities, and Transplanted Bodies in Hans Sloane's 'Natural History of Jamaica,'" *William and Mary Quarterly* 3:57 (2000): pp. 35-78.

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