

Traveling Women: Narrative Visions of Early America, and: Indians and Emigrants: Encounters on the Overland Trails.

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Traveling Women: Narrative Visions of Early America, and: Indians and Emigrants: Encounters on the Overland Trails (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

Lillian Schlissel

***Traveling Women: Narrative Visions of Early America.* By Susan Clair Imbarrato. Athens: Ohio University Press. 2006.**

***Indians and Emigrants: Encounters on the Overland Trails.* By Michael L. Tate. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 2006.**

Each of these new studies provides evidence that American travel literature, an area of research many times mined by scholars, is still capable of bringing new perceptions and new materials into consideration. Both scholars have searched out new manuscripts and used them to extend perceptions of a young nation so constantly on the move.

In *Traveling Women*, Susan Clair Imbarrato gathered manuscripts of an early period of travel, from 1700 to 1830. She had fifty narratives and read closely twenty-five. Even these, as disparate as they were, support her contention that “early America was explored and settled by women as well as by men,” and that women were acute observers not only of manners and class distinctions, but also of political events (6). There is fresh detail in these pages so that even an experienced reader will find much that is useful in new research.

The journals are gathered into rubrics of comparison—travel literature and literary accounts, personal letters, and guide books, and there are some interesting shades of difference. The hurdle for the reader is the author’s use of the term *genteel* to describe too many writers. We must fend for ourselves to distinguish who is and who is not *genteel*.

One woman described Sarah Kemble Knight with some astonishment: “Law for mee—what in the world brings You here at this time a night? I never see a woman on the Rode so Dreadfull late, in all the days of my versall life. Who are You?” (95) Traveling late at night, Kemble is mistaken for a prostitute. Gentility, apparently, is not an assured status for a

woman on the road.

Imbarrato wisely notes that “mobility elicits questions of identity: just who is this person traveling and how, if at all, will he or she be affected by the new environs?” (215) The question of mobility as it affects identity has both political and philosophical implications. As the question may be extended to gender, there is still another degree of inquiry historians have not yet resolved. Does mobility diminish or change identity as it is perceived by strangers; how is identity held constant when all circumstances are subject to transformation?

This is on the whole a useful book, particularly in its generous extracts from manuscripts. The word *genteel*, however, is ambiguous when it is applied to women on the move. For women, travel is usually accomplished with the protection of men, but when a reader is told that traveling women have “*genteel expectations*,” it is difficult to make judgments without knowing something about who they were to start with.

Michael Tate’s book, *Indians and Emigrants: Encounters on the Overland Trails*, documents the often-forgotten fact that Indians along the western routes were often eager tradespeople, who brought smoked meat and vegetables to “swap” with travelers on the wagon trains (47). Roadside “business” was often carried on by women who did a good deal of the trading themselves (42). Well-made moccasins could be purchased from fifty cents to two dollars, and there seems to have been extensive barter in calico shirts. Many Indians demanded coin for the use of their “bridges,” which were sometimes little more than guy ropes strung across rivers at safe places. All evidence points to the fact that, in some years, the Overland Trail was a kind of toll road, and there are accounts of Indians who volunteered their help when wagons broke down or when emigrants “gave out.”

Tribes that initially saw the overland wagons as only “passing through” came to realize that the slaughter of bison herds by travelers would in time end a way of life that **[End Page 146]** had been theirs for centuries.

In hope of reaching an accommodation with whites, “tribal elders placed greater emphasis on demanding compensation for their losses” (142).

That misguided effort, however, points to the question left unanswered in Tate’s book: when barter was supplemented by payments in coin, how did...

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The journals are gathered into rubrics of comparison—travel literature and literary accounts, personal letters, and guide books, and there are some interesting shades of difference. The hurdle for the reader is the author's use of the term *gentle* to describe so many writers. We must fend for ourselves to distinguish who is and who is not *gentle*.

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