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Susan Clair Imbarrato. *Traveling Women: Narrative Visions of Early America.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. xi + 254 pp. $42.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1674-7.

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The Long and Winding Road to Women's Literary History

The feeling one has upon finishing Susan Clair Imbarrato's study, *Traveling Women: Narrative Visions of Early America*, might be likened to the travel experiences of the many women writers she catalogs. One has the sense of having traversed a great expanse of heterogeneous terrain without lingering over, or diving too deeply into, any one particular spot. By gathering the travel journals of more than twenty-five women who embarked on journeys through the colonies and the newly emerging republic, the author provides a comprehensive overview of American women travelers who wrote between 1700 and 1830. Imbarrato states that "by collecting these narratives into one study and drawing on primary materials so extensively, I am making them more accessible to students, scholars, and the general public" (p. 3). Her book certainly accomplishes this important goal.

Rather than relying on a standard chronological or author-based structure, Imbarrato presents her readings of selected travel texts in a useful, theme-based format. She has read the journals carefully and has identified certain key areas that link the experiences and writings of these many women. In her first chapter, "The Language of Travel: The Practical and the Picturesque," Imbarrato examines the conventions of the travel narrative and "its unique capacity to serve as a most appropriate genre for [a woman's] experiences" (p. 26). As she argues, the genre was elastic enough to accommodate women who traveled through Eastern cities or out into the Western frontier, travelers who were forced to relocate and whose journey was practical in nature, in addition to those who were enjoying a recreational tour. The women's responses were as varied as the reasons that compelled them to undertake the journey: "Showing great flexibility, the travel narrative can accommodate travelers who infuse the text with moments of beauty and those who write tentatively about an unfamiliar land" (p. 46). Overall, this chapter usefully explores the aesthetic considerations of travel and the travel narrative to argue that women writers can make a significant, though often overlooked, contribution to our understanding of the genre.

The second chapter, "Ordinary Travel: Public Houses and Travel Conditions," moves from literary/genre considerations into a more materialist approach, as Imbarrato uses her extensive library of travel documents to investigate the physical conditions and facilities that women discovered on their journeys. In addition to a fascinating overview of the challenges of travel in the early days of the republic, Imbarrato's discussion of public houses, inns, and taverns comments on the social and cultural implications of such meeting places: "Whether frequented for business or pleasure, the public house was a scene of unprecedented intermixing of classes and gender. Women contributed to this interaction by partaking in meals and taking up lodging and, as did all travelers, became part of the larger transference of culture and news" (p. 56). Economic class becomes a key consideration as upper- and middle-class women who were forced to withstand crude accommodations–including dirty sheets, coarse meals, and bed-sharing–struggled to assert their gentility in a shifting, unfamiliar environment. The details conveyed in this chapter were among the most striking in the entire book.

Imbarrato's third chapter, "Writing into the Ohio Frontier: Genteel Expectations and Rustic Realities," further pursues the notion of the genteel as her women travelers follow the frontier to its ever-expanding limits. While the discussion presents some clear and useful assertions based on close readings of the primary texts, opportunities to look more closely at the cultural and political implications of the genteel, its use as an oppressive and appropriating force, are generally missed. Here and elsewhere, discussion of nonwhite, non middle-class groups of women, specifically Native Americans and African Americans, is absent or brief. The opportunity in this chapter to pursue the links between an emergent

capitalism and the gender/class hierarchies that women were forced to adhere to is also overlooked. We do get fair and accurate pronouncements about white, middle-class women's fears, like the following: "Rather than voluntarily casting off social preferences in order to embrace an egalitarian society, many travelers were intent on reinforcing class hierarchy by asserting their standards and judging others accordingly" (p. 90). Yet instead of contextualizing this attitude and questioning its origins and impact, the author seems to promote a generally celebratory feeling about these women travelers, describing them as "inspired and determined" as they "document[ed] the settling of America as a dynamic series of interactions followed by reflection" (p. 90).

Imbarrato's description of the situation is accurate, but the investigation might have gone beyond an adjective such as "dynamic" to discuss the appropriation of the American West by white settlers and the slave trade by which the new nation was constructed. Another opportunity for further investigation and contextualization occurs when Imbarrato quotes Lydia B. Bacon writing disparagingly of French Catholics in the Indiana Territory. On reading Bacon's pronouncements, the reader may wonder how Bacon's perspective affirms or refutes dominant perceptions of Catholicism in the early nineteenth century in the United States. Unfortunately, the book does not answer this question. In the final section of this chapter, Imbarrato presents excerpts from travel journals that do address slavery, but the discussion seems brief. More commentary on women's implication in this form of economic exploitation would have been welcome. In fact, at some point early in the study, it would have been helpful to hear the author complicate the phrase "women traveler" to include a discussion of how race disrupts this monolithic category. Black and Native American women "traveled" for other reasons during this period and experienced their status as "women" differently.

The fourth chapter, "Literary Crossroads: Travel Narrative, Poetry, and Novel" returns to genre considerations, as does the fifth, "Capturing Experience: Travel Narrative and Letter, a Comparative View." Both of these chapters place the travel narrative alongside other forms of writing in order to construct a more thorough composite view of women's literary experiences and influence. From a historical materialist approach, the clues to women's reading experiences provided by the travel narratives and journals are invaluable. Imbarrato chronicles the writers' many references to the popular literature of the day, particularly sentimental novels, to give us a rare and direct glimpse of the reading habits and responses of early American women. She notes in chapter 4 that "literary allusions enhance women's travel narratives and expand our understanding of women's intellectual lives. And though women were warned to avoid fiction, for fear it would negatively affect their character, their travel narratives challenge such presumptions and indicate that they, indeed, disregarded such warnings" (p. 166). In the fifth and final chapter, Imbarrato examines women's letters from the same time and contrasts the circumstances and content of a letter–often written from home to a distant recipient–with those of travel writing, which moves from far away back home. This juxtaposition further broadens our awareness of women's daily lives and textual representations of their experiences. She reminds us at the end of chapter 5, "Women may not have been invited formally to share the arena of social and literary discourse with men, but as their letters and diaries attest, they were obviously participating" (p. 211).

Studies such as Imbarrato's *Traveling Women* are crucial as we work to reconstruct the overlooked and undervalued contributions of white women to American literature and culture. Imbarrato has done the important and time-consuming work of uncovering these varied and provocative texts, describing the terrain in clear terms and pointing out the significant landmarks. She has also done some careful archival research demonstrated by her inclusion of helpful drawings, maps, and facsimile reproductions of women's travel documents. In her conclusion, she writes that "one aim of this book is to offer these accounts of early American life in a prerailroad, prephotographic age to a larger audience" (p. 216). Now that she has accomplished her aim, the stage has been set for future scholars to examine more closely the implications–political and social–of these women's observations, to place the documents in a larger context, and to comment on the significance of the voices that were lost.

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