
Female Agents of Population Boosterism: Women's Travel Accounts to Texas during the Early Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

This presentation examines four women who traveled to the Texas borderland in the early nineteenth century, and considers how they became female agents of population boosterism through their travel accounts. These women, Mary Austin Holley from Connecticut, Matilda C. F. Houston from England, Teresa Griffin Vielé from New York, and Elisa Amalie Tvede Waerenskjold from Norway, visited this space between the 1830s to 1850s when the land was in a state of flux. The region of what would become Texas won its independence from the Spanish Empire as Mexico in 1824, then later became the Republic of Texas in 1836, and finally annexed by the United States in 1845. Despite its political confusion, however, Texas always remained attractive to settlers precisely because the availability of land to achieve a better living. The land witnessed a sharp rise in its population especially after the establishment of the Republic of Texas. I argue that the observations that these women wrote in their travel accounts which were later published were written with an intent to demystify Texas and promote settlement. Despite the fact that their visits were made at different times, and having different expectations on what they would see, they wrote their travel account to give a sense to the readers on how Texas was like and how people lived through their writing. Moreover, these women fashioned same ideas of economic benefits and racial superiority while they traveled through and made their observations on Texas. To put it differently, these women arrived in Texas with a similar idea on how a "civilized" space looked like and what to expect from the foreign place. Their publications were written with the intent to encourage white civilized settlers to move to Texas.

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