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Go East, Young Man

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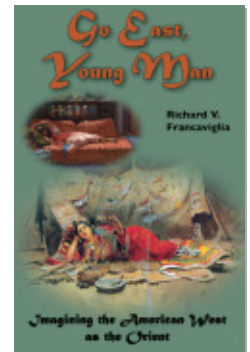
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Introduction

The Malleable Landscape

All of us conjure up images of lands that we have heard about, intend to visit, or would like to live in, and retain impressions of those places that we have seen.

Robin W. Doughty, *At Home in Texas: Early Views of the Land* (1987)

IN OCTOBER OF 2004, ISRAELI GEOGRAPHER REHAV “BUNI” RUBIN and I were intently discussing the landscape of the Holy Land as we drove north from the Dead Sea in the Jordan Valley. Rubín, who has extensive knowledge of the Middle East, pointed out various irrigation projects and talked about the settlements we passed as if they were personal friends he had watched growing and changing over the last several decades. Given my extensive travel experience and fieldwork in the American West, my perspective was naturally quite different from Rubín’s. Although I took in every one of his words about the landscape and savored every view of this “new” place, I was amazed by how a lot of what I observed here in Israel reminded me of a place much closer to home—namely, the Imperial Valley in Southern California’s low desert. Gazing at the Dead Sea, which receded in the side-view mirror of Rubín’s white VW station wagon, I pondered just how much that body of water resembled the Salton Sea. Like the Dead Sea, this salt-rimmed inland lake in California lies below sea level and looks like a slab of blue stone set into a beige-colored plain bordered by bone-dry, heavily eroded hills. Looking left and right as Rubín drove northward on that clear early October day, I was surprised by how familiar this otherwise exotic place felt. As date palms and citrus groves flashed by, I could visualize those same plants that had transformed California’s Coachella Valley into a garden spot—and gave such a similar Middle Eastern “feel” to the landscape of that part of the Golden State.

My thoughts here were not mere fantasies. There are indeed real geologic, climatic, and biotic similarities between these two landscapes, which are further connected by agricultural enterprise and human imagination.¹ However, there are many differences, too. I was conscious of these differences, but what surprised me most was how readily and repeatedly that Southern California

landscape—more than nine thousand miles to the west—inserted itself into my consciousness here in Israel. Even more surprising is how much time separates these landscapes in the popular mind. Although the Imperial Valley sometimes uses Middle Eastern or Near Eastern metaphors to promote its “exotic” qualities—date palms, oases, a salty sea, and even place names like Mecca—those features date from only the early twentieth century. By contrast, the aura of the Holy Land is far more ancient. Its translated place names—we call them the Dead Sea, Jordan River, Sea of Galilee—are legends associated with at least three thousand years of literature, faith, and folklore. Yet I thought both places could almost pass for one another at times as Buni Rubin and I rolled through the fabled Jordan River valley.

My realization about the similarities between the landscapes of Israel and California reminded me of an incident that took place in Arizona about twenty years earlier. At that time, I was managing environmental programs in southeastern Arizona but often worked with staff from the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) in Phoenix. On one trip into the hilly country just west of Tombstone, I was accompanied by ADHS planner Sam Hadeed, a Lebanese American who had lived in Arizona for about ten years. As we topped the rise of a limestone-ribbed, scrub-covered hill, Sam exclaimed, “This countryside looks so similar to the hills of Lebanon that it feels just like home!” Here, thousands of miles from Lebanon, Sam saw in that landscape stretching off into Arizona’s San Pedro Valley a vision of a similar-appearing ancestral landscape. I’ve thought a lot about Sam’s statement, for he was a scientist rather than a romanticist. Yet he could see such clear parallels between a landscape in the American West and one in the Middle East that it prompted him to make that statement about “home” out of the blue.

Much more recently, I informed an associate named Abdul Kelani that I was headed to Phoenix for a meeting. Abdul, who had moved to the United States from Syria about twenty years ago, responded that he loved Phoenix because it “seems so much like Damascus.” By this, he meant the look of the landscape of stark hills rising out of the desert floor, and also the quality of the atmosphere—low humidity and often clear skies. Abdul also added that the profusion of date palm trees in Arizona’s capital city helped him associate Phoenix with Damascus.

This tendency to imagine or recall a much more familiar place in an exotic place reminds me of an evocative passage in Andrea Barrett’s “Servants of the Map.” In that short story, a British cartographer mapping the rugged interior of Asia writes: “As I fill in the blank spaces with the bends and curves of a river valley, the dips and rises of a range, the drawing begins to resemble a map of

home.”² When similar feelings come to me, they always prompt me to ask two questions: Am I so beguiled by the familiar that I neglect to really experience the new? Or, conversely, by seeing the familiar in the exotic, am I insightful and sensitive to those factors that link, rather than separate, places located far from each other? I still have no answer to this two-sided question, but I do know that I am not alone when I feel that similarity. What surprises me is how rarely, with few exceptions, scholars have ever studied this phenomenon. Those exceptions include cultural or human geographers like Robin Doughty, David Seamon, and Edward Relph. As Doughty put it in describing how newcomers encountered Texas in the 1800s: “In entering a new environment and in coming to terms with its features, settlers transpose images of the land with which they are familiar and construct new ones by employing terms that they and others understand. They are . . .” he noted, “anxious to inform relatives and friends about what is the same and about what is different.”³

Obviously, Sam Hadeed, Abdul Kelani, and I are by no means the first people to see similarities between our native lands and places elsewhere. The tendency to make such comparisons is probably as old as humankind. People migrate but they carry, as part of their cultural baggage, memories of other places they have experienced. And yet there is something modern about this tendency, which became an integral part of modern exploration and discovery. Upon experiencing the Caribbean islands in the 1490s, for example, Christopher Columbus declared that what he saw here was “like Andalusia in springtime.” This was no doubt a heartfelt sentiment but one perhaps also calculated to stimulate and validate Spain’s interest in colonizing the place.⁴ These comparisons intensified with time. The comparison of places that are far distant from each other became especially common during the age of tourism and transoceanic migration, which began about 1800. By that time, several centuries of landscape painting had taught people to see places somewhat differently than people had seen them in earlier periods. Through increasingly elaborate descriptions and images, people became aware of details, textures, and compositions. In other words, they now developed skills in “graphicacy,” much as Western culture developed skills in literacy after the printing press brought the written word to the masses. As a result, many people became part of the modern, visually oriented world, and nothing would ever be quite the same.

During the nineteenth century, as Americans became sophisticated international travelers, they often compared places at home with the exotic places that they experienced while traveling abroad. Consider, for example, how Mark Twain’s writing influenced American attitudes about exotic places. Although his best-selling book titled *The Innocents Abroad*⁵ (1869) was written

with caustic wit, the typical American traveler found much to admire in the Old World as he or she read Twain's book. Moreover, technology now brought those places closer to the United States. Traveling to Europe, the Near East, and even Asia became increasingly easier as the steamship and railroad greatly reduced travel time on sea and land. In his insightful book *Irreverent Pilgrims*, Franklin Walker noted that Twain's perceptions of the Orient changed with the trials and tribulations of travel: Twain initially observed that for all the misery and poverty that he encountered, "These people are naturally good-hearted and intelligent, and with education and liberty, would be a happy and contented race"—if it were not for Turkish oppression. However, "as he traveled south plagued by fatigue, fever, and daily discomfort, the dream of a picturesque land of Arabian Nights or Biblical patriarch dissolved under the glaring Syrian sun into an awareness of a people more miserable than any he had ever seen—even than the Goshoot Indians of Nevada." Twain was, in fact, nearly done in by "the God-forsaken barrenness and desolation of Syria," which he described even more harshly than the barrenness and desolation of Nevada. Moreover, with each mile traversed in Syria, Twain became more and more critical of the Arab men he encountered, describing them in prose that was "either marked by invective or humorously pejorative."⁶ This reminds me that one's state of mind, and even health, can determine how one sees and recounts the Orient. When all is right with the world and one's health superb, the Orient can be a glistening, magical place. But when a traveler is nearly doubled over with intestinal cramps, the Orient's people and landscapes can suffer in his or her prose, poetry, and memories.

As Americans traveled with eyes wide open, they inevitably drew comparisons between what they saw abroad and what they remembered in their own country. By century's end, it became second nature to compare and equate coastal California with the Mediterranean, Colorado's Rocky Mountains with the Alps, and Utah's Wasatch Front with the Holy Land. More specifically, as historian Earl Pomeroy noted, Americans often compared California to Italy, the Riviera, or Palestine, and the Rocky Mountains to the Swiss or French Alps.⁷ To see how this happened, we need to consult the rich exploration and travel literature consisting of reports, journals, diaries, maps, and advertisements. There, in both words and images, is the world for us to compare and covet. True, these travelers represented a somewhat elite segment of the American public, but many people were avid readers. Many of these travel books became best sellers.

In his preface to the original (1874) edition of *Picturesque America*, William Cullen Bryant observed that even though "our country abounds

with scenery new to the artist's pencil," much of it was neglected. By contrast, Bryant noted, "In the Old World every spot . . . has been visited by the artist; studied and sketched again and again." Vexed by this, Bryant challenged artists to visit and portray our nation, where "thousands of charming nooks are waiting to yield their beauty to the pencil of the first comer." Sexual connotations of this metaphor aside, Bryant made an interesting point. Now that the transcontinental railroad reached the Pacific, one could travel to the "Rocky Mountains rivaling Switzerland in its scenery of rock piled on rock, up to the region of the clouds. But . . ." Bryant added, "Switzerland has no such groves on its mountainsides, nor has even Libanus [Lebanon], with its ancient cedars, as those which raise the astonishment of the visitor to that Western region—trees of such prodigious height and enormous dimensions that, to attain their present bulk, we might imagine them to have sprouted from the seed at the time of the Trojan War." Bryant cautioned Americans who compared the American West with similar landscapes in the Old World. There is, as he put it, "an essential difference" the traveler should recognize between America and Eurasia. "So, when he journeys among the steeps, and gorges, fountains of Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon, he will perceive that he is neither among the Alps nor the Pyrenees." As Bryant put it, discerning people (like himself) realize that "the precipices wear outlines of their own, the soil has its peculiar vegetation, the clouds and the sky have their distinct physiognomy." This was certainly sound advice, but it tended to fall on deaf ears at that time. Why? Because the West was not yet the West we know today, but was in the process of becoming that region in the popular mind. Before that happened, people judged the West in terms of what about it was similar to what they had seen elsewhere. Orientalism was a part of this process of testing western North America against other more distant places.

In fact, how we view the landscape of home depends on what we've experienced elsewhere. As cultural historian Neil Harris observed, "Travel was a broad and catholic teacher," and it ultimately led to an increased American cosmopolitanism. In turn, however, that cosmopolitanism was increasingly viewed as heretical. It became "a threat to patriotism," for, as Harris put it, "belief in a peculiar national virtue stretched thin when it encountered the tempting philosophy of cultural pluralism." Equally challenging, perhaps, was the sense of unease that Americans felt when they pondered the Old World's ancient ruins, where "past grandeur and present degradation were so graphically contrasted." This contrast "served to remind the onlooker of the power and brilliance that had once held sway there" and suggested that a similar fate might await the new and promising United States. This concern, according to

Harris, was exacerbated by the growing social discontent in America's increasingly crowded cities. To counter this, the masses needed a worthy diversion. Harris interprets Americans' seemingly insatiable interest in broadening education in great works of art and architecture in the nineteenth century as "tools to maintain a minimum level of public security and contentment, opiates which would quiet and eventually tame the savage beasts who prowled in American cities."⁸

Although Harris specifically addressed America's wholesale fascination with Europe as a cultural center, the Orient, too, was another part of the world that was emulated enthusiastically. In fact, to virtually all Americans, no part of the world was portrayed as more mysterious and more interesting than the Orient. The most surprising thing about the Orient, perhaps, is how many people made reference to that faraway region whether or not they had ever actually visited it. But if the term "Orient" was frequently spoken or penned, just what, and where, was this mysterious place?

Geographically speaking, the Orient is difficult to define, for it literally means any place east of the West. More specifically, though, it meant places where Oriental peoples lived. In European thought, the Orient meant Asia—which was located to the east of Europe, about where the Oder and Don Rivers flow. Europe had long been fascinated by this Orient, but by about 1760, the word *Orientalism* became part of the English language. Asia itself is a Western construct, and that huge part of the Eurasian landmass reaches well into the area of the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea.

Given North America's colonization by Europeans over the last half millennium, it is no surprise that a fascination with the East spread westward across the Atlantic. Although this book focuses on North America, it will refer to Europe more or less throughout, as the cultures are so closely allied. Typically, Europeans and Americans in the past spoke of two Orientals—the Far East and the Near East. Today, we are more likely to call the Far East by another, but only slightly less West-centric term, *East Asia*. However, I shall use the former term *Far East* when relevant, that is, when discussing Western views of that part of the East in the context of nineteenth-century descriptions of it. Of course, we use the term *Middle East* today for what people in the nineteenth century called the Near East. Both of these Easts—Near and Far—are different enough from the West to be as easily understood intuitively as they are difficult to define geographically.

For their part, geographers, diplomats, and merchants long considered terminology such as the *Far East* too vague and simplistic. To make more sense out of the Orient, they divided it into many subregions—for example, East

Asia, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia. We still refer to the Middle East today but recognize that it has many important subregions, such as Asia Minor, the Holy Land, and the Arabian Peninsula. These subregions of a much larger Orient may seem to be based on real physical geography but are actually cultural constructs. Then, too, historians and social critics may define the East as areas where fundamentally different religions and cultures—for example, Islam or Buddhism—dominate. As will become apparent, I employ a fairly liberal definition of the Orient, one that accounts for the early spread of Islam across northern Africa to Gibraltar on the west; this, paradoxically, means that some of the Orient lies south of Europe. In my definition, then, the Orient sprawls nearly seven thousand miles (11,265 km) longitudinally, from Morocco to Malaysia.

The Orient, of course, is as much a state of mind as an actual place. Therefore, literary critics and writers offer noteworthy definitions that are based less on actual geography than on personal, and sometimes very emotional, beliefs. For example, in attempting to define the Orient, Argentine poet and essayist Jorge Luis Borges stated that there “is something we feel as the Orient . . . but . . . I don’t know how I can define it.” Despite this disclaimer, however, Borges went on to define the Orient as well as anyone ever has:

It is above all a world of extremes in which people are very happy or very unhappy, very rich or very poor. A world of Kings who do not explain what they do. Of Kings who are, we might say, as irresponsible as Gods.⁹

There is no separating such a place from the imagination of the individual reader. Timothy Weiss summed up Borges’s understanding of the Orient as “having the shape of a story; in this story-within-stories, one eventually finds, he surmises, one’s own tale and destiny.”¹⁰ This story-inspired definition of the Orient is astute. It not only incorporates a touch of Arabian mystery but may also help explain the nearly insatiable Western interest in the East from ancient times, and certainly the Christian Middle Ages, to the present. Perceptions of this East are not only driven by popular narratives but are also likely to be highly personalized. This East may be far away geographically, but it is psychologically part of us—and we are part of it.

Something else about Borges’s description is noteworthy. A despotic ruler playing God is conceivable in this place we have identified as the exotic “other” because we believe that it is a place that has objectively different rules than those by which Western society normally plays.¹¹ Such an Orient is conceivable, and readily conceived, by westerners as a place that serves as a counterpoint to ours. *We* are the West(erners), *they* are the Orient(als).

It is here that not only the Orient but also *Orientalism* needs to be addressed and defined. The first definition of Orientalism in most dictionaries is “any trait, style, custom, expression, etc. peculiar to Oriental peoples.” The second involves “knowledge or use of Oriental languages, history, etc.” The third definition involves “imitation or assimilation of that which is Oriental, especially in religious or philosophical thought, or in art.”¹² It is this third definition that interests me most in this book because it is central to understanding how and why Americans imitate(d) the Orient and how this played out so commonly and so effectively in the American West.

Orientalism would not exist if there were no underlying interest or fascination with the Orient. I am suggesting not only that Orientalism is part of Western culture’s need to identify the exotic “other” but also that it is an integral part of Western culture’s own cultural construction. We imitate(d) or assimilate(d) the Orient because doing so helps our culture construct a more complete identity. In other words, the Orientalization of American culture—or in this case, the American West—brings fuller meaning to the people and places we encounter on American soil.

As I use the term here, Orientalism is a mind-set that readily imagines or perceives an East when it encounters non-Eastern peoples and places. It involves the West’s fascination with a part of the world identified as the East. In a literal and literary sense, Orientalism is a large and contested body of knowledge about the Orient. According to Edward Said in his pathbreaking 1978 book *Orientalism*, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences.” Said’s premise is that Orientalism represents the creation and study of an Orient by westerners (Europeans) for a particular reason, namely, the appropriation and domination of that East. In Said’s view, Orientalism is both disingenuous and exploitative. It may offer faint praise, but the Western view of the Orient is ultimately intended to foster inferiority through imperialism. In Said’s view, then, Orientalism is a form of containment, defining as the “other” those who are to be subdued.

Said’s hypothesis is widely, though not universally, accepted. According to art historian John MacKenzie, Orientalism also involves genuinely positive depictions of, even an admiration for, the peoples and places of the East. We can see this in flattering artistic representations of the East by westerners. As MacKenzie put it, Said’s interpretation of Orientalism imagines early Orientalists’ “negative stereotyping, slights and insults on the basis of late twentieth-century perceptions.” MacKenzie, in other words, sees a great deal

of presentism in Said's interpretation. He notes that viewing the past with today's sentiments and sensitivities can misinform us about how people in earlier periods really felt about the Orient and its peoples. Thus, even though MacKenzie sympathizes with some of Said's overtly political concerns about affairs in the recent Middle East, he claims that Said's thesis ultimately "poisons the deep wells of sympathy and respect which artists of all sorts felt for the East in the nineteenth century, which they expressed in distinctively nineteenth-century ways, not necessarily amenable to the critical values of the twentieth century."¹³

Travel accounts are also more complex than they first appear. As Harry Liebersohn noted in *Aristocratic Encounters: European Travelers and North American Indians* (1998), "it is difficult to adopt a method of analyzing travel encounters that is supple enough to follow the movement of travelers and their writings across the many borders" of inquiry about the subject. Liebersohn further notes that "Said's Orientalism has emphasized the moment of pure project[ion] of Western power onto non-Western societies." But "this kind of radical critique . . ." about "an inherent colonialism of Western culture has given way to a blurrier map of cultural encounters." Liebersohn concludes that "romantic travelers have a story of their own to tell, related to yet removed from the world of their predecessors."¹⁴ More recently, historian David Wrobel called for a post-Saidian interpretation of travel narratives in the American West.¹⁵ Orientalism, in this post-Saidian view, emerges as something more refreshingly expansive, providing room for broader interpretation(s) of how the West (in this case, the United States) perceives the East.

A careful reading of the historical literature suggests that people in the United States generally, and the American West in particular, regarded the Orient with affection as well as fear; which is to say that the Orient was regarded with considerable ambivalence. Moreover, because Orientalism is not confined to one portion of the West but is broadly shared by a wide range of people, we do well to expand the definition of sources that can help illustrate and explain it. When studying Orientalism, MacKenzie urges us to consider popular culture as well as elite art and literature. This is good advice. Although Edward Said's *Orientalism* employed elite literary sources almost exclusively,¹⁶ Orientalism itself reaches deeply into all areas of popular culture.¹⁷ It includes sources as diverse as popular novels, architecture, art, advertising, film, and music.¹⁸

Rather than viewing Orientalism as universally negative, therefore, it might be more profitable to recognize that it may be negative, positive, or both. It has been so ever since the first Greeks looked eastward, the

first European Christian pilgrims set out toward the Holy Land, the first Crusaders marched toward Jerusalem, the explorer Marco Polo trekked to China, and the nationalistic Napoleon marched into Egypt. Many people who would never actually visit the Orient also formed opinions about that part of the world and its cultures. In other words, Orientalists are simply people who envision and engage the Orient (and its peoples) for a wide variety of reasons. Rather than brand their interests and motives as good or bad, I simply acknowledge that their Orientalism has yielded considerable information about that part (or those parts) of the world—information that has often been imported into our culture from diverse sources. Orientalism, then, is a vehicle by which knowledge about places and peoples is transferred and applied, however imperfectly, to the non-Orient (i.e., Europe and the Americas). Just as Orientalism may be the result of varied intentions, it may also be well-informed or ill-informed.

Even though the Orientalism imported into the American West originated in Europe, it had its own permutations on American soil. In Europe and France in particular, Orientalism was closely linked to organized military imperial expansion, though aesthetics played a large role, too. In the United States, Orientalism began to flower in a new nation that had just begun to ponder westward expansion as the collective impulse of individuals. The Orientalism they took westward with them was not only complex but (like its European counterpart) also changeable through time. Like its European progenitor, American Orientalism has a dual identity; it may involve either traditional religious and spiritual associations or physical and material excesses (of flesh, wealth, hubris). The former are some of the loftiest aspects of Western civilization, while the latter are considered decadent, and the stuff against which moral crusaders have railed for centuries.¹⁹

In Orientalism, the East has meaning as both geographical position and metaphor. The Orient as East is associated with the rising of the sun in the east—hence the concept of Jerusalem at the top of early maps. Its position there symbolizes that city's importance, and that positioning persists in our using the word "orientation" to signify up (or top) on a map—even though that position is now conventionally north. The East is metaphorical for another reason: before the sun rises in the east, that region is bathed in darkness. Just as we might seek the sun by traveling west (as it seems to do) and hence find constant renewal, by looking eastward we greet a new day, but in so doing, find far more than the rising sun—we also inevitably encounter the darkness that is banished by the light. The metaphor translates into a basic tenet of Christianity: the sun rises in the east, while the Son (of God) symbolically rises on Easter.

This, coupled with the fact that traveling eastward brought Europeans face to face with new (or, rather, rediscovered) environments such as the desert—with its binary challenges as either tempting wilderness or nurturer of God’s spirit through light²⁰—led them to perceive the East as a place where one’s spiritual mettle could be tested. That kind of desert spiritual test also occurred in the American West when settlers such as the Mormons encountered conditions of increasing aridity with every mile they traveled westward. This new region in the American West, then, was akin to that experienced by Europeans who traveled eastward during the Crusades. Finding something familiar in this new West was no accident or coincidence. Many of our Euro-American values about such desert landscapes were inherited from biblical and other stories that originated in the East.

Nineteenth-century American Orientalism reveals a deep searching for spirituality. In *No Place of Grace* (1981), T. J. Jackson Lears observed that Orientalism was not simply “a trivial exercise in exoticism” nor, for that matter, was it even “a response to the spiritual turmoil of the late nineteenth century.” Oriental mysticism, by which Lears particularly meant eastern Asian Buddhism, became popular in the late nineteenth century. Lears attributed this to a strong growing antimodernism: the East suggested mystery while the West at that time, circa 1880–1920, demanded increasing rationality. Oriental mysticism could, as Lears noted using explicitly Freudian terminology, help one recover the “primal irrationality” that had been lost in the West. Among others, Lears used three case studies of elite Bostonians—eccentric surgeon William Sturgis Bigelow, scientist Percival Lowell, and poet George Cabot Lodge—to demonstrate how thoroughly Orientalism consumed, and sometimes exhausted, its practitioners. All three of the Bostonians revealed, like American society itself, the titanic struggles between authority and responsibility in late Victorian society. Lears focused especially on the fascination with Far Eastern—notably Japanese—Orientalism but reminded us that “popular Orientalism was unsystematic and diverse” and that “its adherents were often ignorant of the traditions they claimed to embrace.”²¹ That ignorance, of course, does not make the Orient any less potent as an influence; in fact, it may have enhanced it.

American Orientalism is as old as the nation itself; in fact it is far older. By restlessly moving westward, settlers were paradoxically moving closer to the Orient by way of the Pacific Ocean. This American movement into the West as a “passage to India” theme was discussed by Henry Nash Smith in his classic book *Virgin Land*.²² The Asia toward which Americans were destined was itself always vague and ever shifting. Smith quoted Thomas Jefferson—whom

he calls “the intellectual father of the American advance to the Pacific”—as a promoter of trade with the East Indies. Smith titled the first “book” of *Virgin Land* “Passage to India” and cited Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), which speculated that the way to the American West “does not pause at the Mississippi or the Pacific, nor conduct toward a worn-out China or Japan, but leads on direct a tangent to this sphere, summer and winter, day and night, sun down, moon down, and at last earth down, too.”²³ By this, Thoreau meant that the East Indies was America’s ultimate destiny.

There is, of course, something very Columbian in the belief that by traveling westward, one would find the riches—gems, spices, and the like—of the Indies. This was obvious very early in the European exploration of the Americas. Consider the Spanish conquistador Cortés, who moved into Mexico City in 1519 and soon set his sights on the Pacific Ocean, or South Sea as it was called. Cortés observed that “everybody who has any knowledge and experience of navigation in the Indies is certain that the discovery of the South Sea would lead to discovery of many islands rich in gold, pearls, precious stones, spices and other unknown and wonderful things.”²⁴ By Jefferson’s and Thoreau’s time, however, the Indies was no longer the Antillean (or West) Indies, but rather the real thing—Southeast Asia and even the Indian subcontinent; in other words, the East Indies that Columbus had sought, but failed to find. More to the point, whereas China and Japan were recognized empires in their own right, the Indies seemed far less coherent, and less claimed by authority. With increased intercourse and increased political ambition worldwide, however, even Japan, Korea, and China would become fair game for American commerce and adventurism. In that way, the entire Orient, as it came to be called, offered seemingly unlimited possibilities to the American imagination.

According to cultural historian Oleg Grabar, at least four “impulses”—one might also call them factors—were operative in popular American Orientalism. The first was a Protestant search for the spaces and sites associated with biblical revelations, as suggested in part by the proliferation of biblical toponyms in many parts of the country. The second impulse involved a fascination with aspects of culture associated with European aristocracy—the very peoples who had obtained Islamic and other Eastern art and artifacts since the Middle Ages. The third was Americans’ tendency to incorporate symbols, designs, and other aspects of Eastern culture into public art, architecture, and popular culture. This Orient that Americans copied or mimicked was, according to Grabar, “curiously poised between desire and repulsion, beauty and ugliness, [but] it is an Orient that answers deep psychological and social needs.” So far,

these three factors are for the most part positive. However, the last impulse was a “critical rather than sympathetic” attitude toward the Orient, or, as Grabar concluded, “The Orient only matters as providing illustrations for some significant moments in the long history that led to the American promised Land, and its very misery is a demonstration of the latter’s success.”²⁵ Grabar here quotes Mark Twain, whose scathing comments about places he had visited in the Holy Land formed the essence of *The Innocents Abroad* (1869). Although Grabar does raise many valid points, he fails to note that Twain was not exactly the best choice to illustrate Americans’ supposedly critical attitudes about the East. Twain was not only an ailing individual at times, but also the greatest satirist of his era. In his writings and on stage, Twain criticized virtually everything—including his own country and the entire human race. Depending on his mood and mercurial pen, Twain could be as anti-American as he was anti-Oriental.

Orientalism was a powerful force in shaping the way newcomers encountered, and made sense of, the peoples and places they found in the North American West. As a revisionist historical geography of the American West, this book will focus on places and how they are perceived, especially why one place and its peoples can so readily remind us of other places and peoples. Its main focus is on landscapes that capture aspects of their prototypes elsewhere. These landscapes can be thought of as “surrogates” in that they serve as substitutes for the real landscapes they mimic. Similarly, peoples encountered in one place can remind us of peoples seen elsewhere. A major premise of this book is that people and place are inseparable in this process of creating new cultural identities. As identities shift from place to place and from culture to culture, they are shaped and reshaped through a kind of mimesis through time.

The landscape, as one of the grand artifacts that a culture constructs, is seemingly permanent, but it, like the imagination that encounters it, is actually highly malleable. The landscape is also physically manipulable. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, we shape landscapes and they in turn shape us. When we name a community in North America “Mecca” or “Lebanon,” we subliminally imprint it with associations and memories, some very distant or ancient. Like adoptive parents, people experiencing a new landscape may give the new place an older, preconceived identity—much like a parent names a child after a relative and by so doing imposes a series of traditions and expectations. To parents, this is natural enough, but it imposes a preconceived identity on the child. The surrogate, in other words, is granted some of the character given the original through a process that seems harmless enough—perhaps even flattering—and is disarmingly simple.

Studied more closely, however, the adoption of a surrogate landscape is a complex act. The surrogate landscape is on the one hand counterfeit; yet on the other it is a tribute to the original. The fact that such a landscape is copied at all suggests the power of the original in the popular mind. Consider the Holy Land as a case in point. Although the real Holy Land is incomparable, it is also surprisingly susceptible to duplication. Witness its iconization on Christmas cards, wherein wise men are placed against an immediately recognizable background of desert, palm trees, and indigo skies. In the Desert Christ Park near Yucca Valley, California, the rock-ribbed landscape of the New World becomes the Old World as statues of Jesus in various stages of his life are placed in this hilly, boulder-strewn area. Through such conflation, the Mojave Desert landscape of the park becomes, in a word, biblical. Because a place will be copied only if people associate it with something significant—often an event or events—it is therefore replicable elsewhere through surrogacy only if two factors—geographic conditions and human imagination—are present.

Such comparisons may seem timeless or perhaps ageless, but the process by which original places become treasured, even sacred, may occur in a surprisingly short time.²⁶ Consider, for example, the Navajo (Diné) Indian reverence for the four mountains that anchor their homeland in the “Four Corners” area of the American Southwest. This landscape is an indelible part of Navajo identity today and would seem to have been so for thousands of years. The archaeological and historical record shows, however, that the Navajo people arrived here from the northern Great Plains as late as about 1200 or 1300 AD. Seven or eight hundred years may seem like a rather short time, but traditional Navajo spiritual and cultural identity is now so dependent on that new place in the Southwest that it seems eternal. If we keep in mind that even Western culture as we know it has been evolving, and that most of our national identities (such as Italian, German, or American) are only two or three centuries old, the speed at which identities take shape should not be surprising.

In fact, the process can operate much more quickly, as the Mormon settlement of Utah confirms. Only about 150 years have passed since the Mormons arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in July of 1847, yet it is now their homeland. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Mormons almost instantly transformed the landscape into the center of their religion by equating its landscape with lands mentioned in the Bible. When this place making by the Mormons began, western North America had been in a state of flux geopolitically for more than a century. In the early nineteenth century, the North American West belonged to Spain (then Mexico) and Britain. Russia was a minor player and about to

exit the stage, but it did leave an easy-to-romanticize heritage behind. Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery expedition helped establish an American foothold in the Far West in 1805. Between then and 1848, the American West was explored and then claimed by the United States at an increasingly rapid pace. A fascination with the Orient was popular in the United States at this time, but most Americans lived along the Eastern Seaboard and were now actively settling the Midwest. This means that the Orientalization of the American West was underway well before settlers, and even explorers, from the United States arrived there in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Still, the American West held special promise. To get a hint of Euro-Americans' mindset, we need only recall that one of Lewis and Clark's goals was to determine whether the Indians there were members of the Lost Tribes of Israel.

From about 1820 into the 1880s, the opening of the Anglo-American West was documented for audiences in American cities along the Eastern Seaboard and in the Midwest. Europeans too were keenly interested in the North American frontier. The West drew European writers who penned reports and stories for their readers back home. The American West, then, was not only explored and settled by real pioneers but also opened in a very dramatic and literary fashion—the drama being a literal acting out of a story for an eager audience. In this story, the landscape was a major player, as so much of the continuity of westward discovery was based on vivid descriptions of Eastern, or Oriental, places—their topography, vegetation, hydrology, and their native residents.²⁷

America's deep interest in the Orient helped to transform regions being explored and settled in North America into "exotic" locales. This means that the imagined (if not imaginary) East actually had a role in shaping a formative American region. Ironically, western America was captured by the Orient, rather than vice versa. This, of course, was more of a voluntary surrender to the East in the Western imagination, but that type of self-deception was not necessarily pathological. Rather, it reveals the East as inspirational during the age of romanticism, when it was more or less expected that a writer or traveler would become emotionally engaged with a particular subject. The landscape itself was one such subject, or rather object, that was regarded subjectively.²⁸

As will soon become apparent, the Orientalization of the American landscape worked hand in hand with the Orientalization of people in frontier America. This process began early. Consider, for example, how the eastern portion of the early American nation was Orientalized. In describing the Indian wars occurring in the frontier areas of the Southeast in 1775, Indian trader James Adair noted that "a sufficient number of discreet orderly traders"

was needed to bring stability to a dangerous and chaotic situation. “Formerly . . .” Adair noted, “each trader had a license for two towns, or villages; but according to the present unwise plan, two and even three Arab-like pedlars sculk about in one of those villages.” These traders, of course, were not really Arabs, but they acted the way Adair assumed Arabs operated—in a very enterprising fashion but without a European sense of honor, and with little or no discipline.²⁹ At the time, this was an effective way to reaffirm how good British merchants should operate; which is to say honorably, within the law, and with a sense of the civic good. This upright behavior would in turn ensure that Indians were treated fairly and that they wouldn’t rebel against the Crown.

On the early westward-moving frontier, even Anglo or Anglo-American subjects were sometimes Orientalized—oftentimes voluntarily. In describing how he moved about the Southeast in the 1830s, a soldier noted that his conduct during the Seminole wars left him doubtful. To help the reader better understand how “a dark, uncertain blank . . . filled my soul with disappointment and dismay,” he placed himself in yet another more literary travel scenario, observing that “I felt like the adventurer merchant in the Arabian Tales, who, in the midst of his exalted enthusiasm, kicked and upset his basket of crockery, and found himself reduced to nothing; it seemed to me as though, in Scripture phrase, I had strained at a gnat and swallowed a camel.”³⁰ This literary trope confirms that the unstable frontier encouraged romantic allusions and illusions. At this time and in this frontier setting, Orientalism flourished.

But even more familiar places could be Orientalized early on. The fact that nineteenth-century travelers envisioned themselves having real Oriental experiences on the East Coast reveals just how primed they were for exotic adventure. How else would one explain an author describing the area near Cape Cod in 1838 as follows: “The sand and barrenness increase; and in not a few places it would need only a party of Bedouin Arabs to cross the traveller’s path, to make him feel that he was in the depths of *an Arabian or Lybian* desert.”³¹ Similarly, even a rather well-known part of New York State was described exotically in 1845: “Long Island has still many unexpected beauties to reward the attentive tourist,” including its less-populated eastern portion, where after “falling back upon the isolated farmhouse, and the whistling ploughboy, anon losing itself in sterile Arabian sands, and frightful cavernous solitudes, it would seem as if some regions of the noble and beautiful Isle contrasted strangely with each other, as the first rude huts of twin brothers on Palatine Hill, differed from the city of the Caesars.”³² In writing the latter passage, Lydia Howard Sigourney emphasized Long Island’s diversity of landscapes using the literary allusions of the day, which were often Oriental and focused on the Near East.

An essential step in Orientalizing the American frontier, then, involved Orientalizing both places and peoples. It is no surprise, therefore, that the area's indigenous inhabitants were also given Oriental identities. This too took place in steps, both chronologically and geographically. In his dramatically written book, *A History of the Indian Wars* (1812), New Englander Daniel Clarke Sanders stated that "the savage of America" does things in a leisurely way, although "his soul is as active as his body is passive." Sanders then added, however, that "there must always be industry somewhere; and among the savages this falls to the lot of the *women*," who "hoe the corn, and secure the harvest" while also doing the cooking and providing "the comforts of the fire-side." This seemed familiar to Sanders. Comparing the Indians' lifestyle to the Arabs, he noted that when these women "have provided a repast, they are not used to eat, agreeably to the custom of Arabian wives, till their husbands have done."³³ By looking to the East, Sanders found a way to understand seemingly exotic human behavior among the Indians on the American frontier.

Studying the writings of the period confirms that the Orientalizing of the American Indians as well as the landscape began on the East Coast and moved westward with the rapidly expanding frontier. This was closely linked to the way that northern Europeans settled North America. By 1820, in describing Detroit, Michigan, which was "called by courtesy a city," J. C. Gilleland observed that the French had a presence here. Because the French were consummate Orientalists, that French connection doubled the likelihood that an Orientalist analogy would find its way into a description. Gilleland cited Volney, who "observes that the ladies in general resemble the Arabian Bedwins, particularly in their shark shaped (low cornered) mouths, and tiger teeth." This may have made these women seem dangerous, but that was not Volney's intent. "Most of them . . ." he added, "have lively, expressive, agreeable countenances."³⁴

These exotic descriptions were written about the relatively tame eastern United States, but only marked a starting point. The farther west that the United States expanded on the North American continent, the more exotic the landscapes and peoples seemed to become. In attempting to make sense out of what they saw, pioneers often envisioned other lands they had heard and read about. Consider, for example, how Americans who had never actually seen a desert might react when they encountered one far west of the Mississippi River. They had no firsthand experience, nor had their parents and grandparents. For generations, their experience had been gained in the humid eastern United States and, before that, western Europe. For most of these people, however, the desert was associated with one thing in particular—religion.

That religion was their own Judeo-Christian heritage, whose early history had unfolded in the desert, which was called “the wilderness” in many biblical passages. Moreover, that wilderness consisted of barren mountains from which various prophets had received inspiration from God. The interior American West, with its desert mountain wildernesses aplenty, was positioned to become a surrogate for the landscapes of the Holy Land.

In the nineteenth century, the Far East was also viewed as a place where spirituality, broadly defined, was regarded more highly than in America. This spirituality transcended Christianity, plumbing other Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. New England was the home of several highly influential writers, including Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), who sought alternative spiritualities. Among these seekers of alternatives was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), who longed for the “unity of Asia” and “the infinitude of the Asiatic soul,” which he contrasted with the more superficial West. Although Emerson is “regarded as the first Orientalist, and indeed the Orientalist *par excellence*, of American literature,”³⁵ many other writers were also engaged philosophically with the East from the 1830s to the 1860s.

At the same time that serious thinkers like Emerson pondered the Orient philosophically, the lavish ornamentation of the East also appealed to Americans’ popular romantic fantasies. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for example, New Englander Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896) characterized a Southern mansion as “built in the Moorish fashion,” with “Moorish arches, slender pillars, and arabesque ornaments.” This mansion “carried the mind back, as in a dream, to the reign of oriental romance in Spain.”³⁶ Describing a persuasive New England minister in a short story published in 1855, Stowe noted that “the devout poetry of his prayer, rich with Orientalism of Scripture, and eloquent with the expression of strong yet chastened emotion, breathed over his audience like music, hushing every one to silence, and beguiling every one to feelings.”³⁷ By this, Stowe meant the rich mysterious tradition of the East that permeates Western religion.

But it could also refer to something more sinister. In a series of letters compiled as a book titled *Pictures of Southern Life, Social, Political, Military*, the Irish-born correspondent and prolific author William Howard Russell compared southern slavery with its counterpart in the Orient. Confessing “a strange thrill” that he “could, for the sum of \$975,” buy a black man, Russell recoiled at the prospect. Noting that “there is no sophistry which could persuade me the [black] man was not a man . . . he was assuredly my fellow creature,” Russell, who covered the Crimean war a few years earlier, then added: “I have seen slave markets in the East, but somehow or other the Orientalism of

the scene cast a coloring over the nature of sales there which deprived them of the disagreeable harshness and mater-of-fact character of the transaction before me.” Why? Russell quickly added: “For Turk, or Smyrniote, or Egyptian to buy and sell slaves seemed rather suited to the eternal fitness of things [there] than otherwise.” As Russell further noted, “The turbaned, shawled, loose-trousered, pipe smoking merchants speaking an unknown tongue looked as if they were engaged in a legitimate business.” But in the American South, Russell noted that it was painful “to see decent-looking men in European garb engaged in the work before me.”³⁸

The Civil War soon erupted over this and other matters. In discussing the supposedly “Civilizing Effect of Slavery” in another book in 1863, Russell described “some good-looking little negro boys and men dressed in liveries, which smacked of our host’s Orientalism.”³⁹ Note that Orientalism here simply means the way things are done in the Orient, and that those things may be perpetually despotic by nature and destiny. The West, on the other hand, should behave differently. Russell’s observations suggest a fruitful avenue of study, namely, how American slavery itself was conceptualized, or even excused, as having roots in the venerable East.

As early as the 1830s, some intellectuals had begun to equate the Orient with both the enslavement of blacks and the oppression of women in America. In 1837, as she expounded on the “morals of slavery,” Harriet Martineau observed that the increasing independence of men was accompanied by the increased dependence of women. In this, she feared American society was “always advancing toward orientalism.” Martineau urged that this “peculiar domestic institution,” as she called it, should be overthrown “with an energy and wisdom that would look more like inspiration than orientalism.”⁴⁰ As Scott Trafton astutely noted in *Egypt Land* (2004), the Mississippi River took on special meaning as “American Egyptomania” spread westward and concerns about slavery intensified. As Trafton put it, “The semiotic and ideological links between the Nile and Mississippi were formative links for the iconography of western expansion.”⁴¹

Then, too, Orientalism could signify something about the way cultures express themselves. For example, James S. Buckingham observed in 1841 that Americans’ tendency toward elaboration—to make, as a social critic put it, settling a claim of ten acres equal “the whole discovery of America”—typifies “all the extravagances and the gaudy phraseology which distinguish our western Orientalism.” In this case, Orientalism means verbosity and “long harangues,” as opposed to the simplicity and straightforwardness that should characterize the United States.

Between 1851 and 1857, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft wrote an elaborate treatise about the origins of Native Americans. Hoping to answer the question, or rather address the common premise, that Native Americans were “Orientals,” Schoolcraft compared their culture (as if it were monolithic) to that of many Asian peoples. Schoolcraft started with a general question: “Are their traits, opinions, and idiosyncrasies, indigenous or American; or are they peculiar to the Indian mind as developed on this continent; and not derivative from other lands?” As was common at the time, Schoolcraft focused mainly on American Indians’ beliefs, philosophy, worship, and languages. Comparing these with varied Asian peoples, he dismissed some traits as purely Native American. Others seemed to be well developed in both hemispheres but may have simply been a result of independent invention. However, still other traits seemed to be traceable to Asia. Even though, as he put it, “it is difficult to introduce comparisons between the barbarous tribes of America, and the existing civilized races of Asia” simply because the former were so “undeveloped” and the latter so “advanced”—there were some fascinating convergences. Moreover, to some observers, the Indians seemed to represent people who were banished from the Old World in a state of primitive idolatry—much like ancient Israelites (Psalms 106:19–31). Furthermore, Schoolcraft contended, there was a relationship between “these pictographic symbols, [and] between the mythology of the eastern and western hemispheres.” Schoolcraft concluded: “Idle, indeed, would be the attempt, at this day, to look for the origin of the American race in any other generic quarter than the eastern continent.” Schoolcraft believed the Indians had migrated from the Orient, but was completely unsure as to when and how this had occurred.⁴²

If the material presented in this introductory chapter suggests that cultural identity, like landscape identity, is surprisingly malleable, it further suggests that people from certain parts of the United States did more of that shaping than did people from other regions. In this regard, New England stands out as a major source of nineteenth-century Orientalist ideas. It should now be apparent that Orientalism connotes more than a simple interest in, or fascination with, the Orient. It also suggests that one is fascinated or interested enough to act by naming places and peoples after the Orient(als), thus giving an Oriental identity to the peoples and places encountered. This study further suggests that the Orientalizing of the West and its peoples was more than simply aesthetic, for it helped facilitate the process of territorial expansion in the nineteenth century.

Fascinated by the Orient, those literary New Englanders played an important role in shaping attitudes about the American West. It is telling, perhaps,

that the intellectuals of New England (for example, in Boston) were called Brahmans (or Brahmins). That word itself is Hindi for someone of high caste—a subtle reminder of the growing importance of the philosophical, if still somewhat elitist, writer in America. Coalescing in a broad triangular region stretching from New York to Boston and out into the western frontier of New York State, influences from the New England region helped shape perceptions of landscape and culture as far west as the Pacific Ocean during that crucial time of encounter and settlement in the nineteenth century, namely the 1830s and 1840s. Other areas on the Eastern Seaboard were also involved in the process of Orientalizing the United States. From Philadelphia on the middle Atlantic Seaboard and also in a broad sweep from Virginia to New Orleans, Americans continued to move westward, and as they did, they brought with them, and even refined, references to the Orient.

To see how this Orientalization affected the exploration and naming of parts of the American West and continues to affect it to the present, we must first travel back in time about two centuries and westward into portions of the American frontier just beyond where the nation's most majestic rivers—the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri—converge. As it turned out, by moving westward into this frontier, Americans would encounter environments and peoples that were considerably different from what was well known on the Eastern Seaboard. With each day's travel westward, increasingly larger prairies were encountered until finally most vegetation vanished. Here, in an area that was solidly controlled by Native Americans, the newly arriving European Americans imagined that the increasingly strange landscapes and peoples they encountered were as much of the Orient as they were of the New World.



Fig. I-1. Pyramid Lake, illustrated in Emanuel Henri Domenech's *Seven Years' Residence in the Great Deserts of North America* (1860).