Go East, Young Man

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The American Zahara

Into and Beyond the Great Western Plains

These vast plains of the western hemisphere may become in time as celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa; for I saw in my route, in various places, tracts of many leagues where the wind had thrown up the sand in all the fanciful form of the ocean’s rolling wave, and on which not a speck of vegetable matter existed.

Zebulon Pike, 1806

The initial Anglo-American move westward occurred during a time when two ways of viewing the world—either through the ancient authority of the classics or a newer, more personally based romanticism—were prevalent, and sometimes in conflict. For several centuries in Europe, the classical world had been plumbed for its authority and aesthetics. By about 1790, neoclassicism still dominated, but romanticism, which represented a way of experiencing the world through emotion and imagination, now became a factor in the way westerners viewed the world. By emphasizing nature and encouraging individuals to react emotionally to what they experienced, romanticism shaped the way travelers perceived new places. In describing the landscape he experienced on a boat trip up the Missouri River in 1811, for example, Henry Marie Brackenridge noted that the scenery on a particular evening was “beautiful beyond any thing I ever beheld.” Disregarding advice to stay close to the boat, Brackenridge wandered off a few miles from it—a risky move no doubt encouraged by his sense of adventure and his secret longing to expose himself to danger. With evening coming on, and “the sky as clear as that represented in Chinese painting,” Brackenridge found “the face of the country enchanting.” Much like a work of art, everything here—“the flowery mead, the swelling ground, the romantic hill, the bold river, the winding rivulet, the shrubberies, [were] all disposed and arranged in the most exquisite manner.”1
The observation about two distinct ways of perceiving the world at this time bears repeating: the landscape that people like Brackenridge beheld earlier in the nineteenth century might be viewed as a Chinese painting, but much of the tone had been set by classicism—the tendency to place things in the context of ancient Greece and Rome. From the very earliest times of the New Republic (circa 1775), this fascination with the logic and discipline of the ancient world led to a classicizing of the frontier, that is, imposing a classical order on a scene that might otherwise seem chaotic. Now, however, the element of emotion fueled by romanticism, which is apparent in Brackenridge’s use of the word “enchanting,” became an ingredient in the mix. Together, they created a potent formula that facilitated the widespread acceptance of Orientalism in America.

The early encounter with the American grasslands was part of the process of Orientalizing the West in that open vistas tended to stimulate the imagination in pivotal ways—namely, by emphasizing vast spaces and distant treeless horizons where the sky descends to meet the skin of the earth unimpeded. The same thing might happen along a shoreline where sand defined the landscape for mile after mile. That shoreline, however, was a linear strip. Now, in the interior of the continent, boundless areas with few or no trees presented a huge canvas that stimulated the traveler to fill in the blanks. The Old World offered many similar seemingly blank spaces filled with danger, intrigue, and romance. One such place was the Sahara Desert—or Zahara as it was widely known after 1815—when American captain James Riley and his crew were shipwrecked off the North African coast, captured by nomads, and sold into slavery. Riley’s tale of survival riveted two generations of Americans and reinforced the popular belief that open spaces and adventure go hand in hand.

If this suggests that an encounter with the first truly wide-open spaces of the American West would be fraught with romance, it should be noted that romanticism about wild, exotic locales began in the area far to the east of the western frontier, namely, in upstate New York as related in James Fenimore Cooper’s Pioneers (the first of the Leatherstocking Tales), and it soon spread to the Ohio River country. And yet, by the early 1800s, as American pioneers continued to move westward from the Eastern Seaboard toward interior North America, they traversed a landscape that had already been “classicized” by their parents. The abundance of classical place names such as Rome and Athens in frontier America reflected, and then encouraged, fantasies about the real places whose names they bore. Even a trip down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to the Gulf of Mexico in the early nineteenth century kindled the
romantic zeitgeist of the period. In describing such a trip in 1831–32, British writer Henry Tudor sarcastically observed that in “whizzing along the banks of the Tiber instead of those of the Ohio” on a steamboat, one soon encountered Rome—not the original city in Italy, of course, but one in the American frontier aspiring to the greatness of its namesake. Tudor continued his harangue, “Next in succession came ‘Troy,’ and lower down ‘Carthage;’ so that, in the space of twenty-four hours, we appeared to have visited the four quarters of the globe; a celerity of movement that left the Arabian enchanters at a boundless distance in the rear.” So common were these pseudoclassical communities that they constituted what Tudor called “a geographical jumble and confusion of countries and places on their hieroglyphical chart—the cities and empires of one hemisphere being placed in juxtaposition with those of another . . . as to be highly amusing to the passing traveler.”

Tudor viewed these places as nearly comical imitations, but Americans took them a bit more seriously. Clearly unimpressed, Tudor observed that “if the adopted names of olden times, dignifying the various localities of American territory, could confer all the treasures of antiquity and literature which they represent, our worthy brethren of the United States would be the most extensive monopolisers of learning, and the most ancient nation in the world.” Interestingly, even the process of giving these frontier places classical names embodied more than a hint of a penchant for romanticism.

Tudor mocked this American penchant for one-upping even Arabian enchanters at creating fictional identities by naming new places after ancient ones; however, it reflected a deeper condition, namely, the persistent and increasingly desperate search for classical antiquity in the New World. There was a good reason for this. For minds used to thinking that classical knowledge represented the zenith of culture, the recentness of the American scene must have generated deep insecurities. Moreover, a growing sense of patriotism based on the grandeur and majesty of the American frontier seemed to call for some kind of endorsement. What better way to enable the frontier than to brand it with a deeply historical identity, or authenticity? That even a cynic like Tudor could succumb to the enchantment of the New World was evident when he met his match far to the south near Mexico City. In describing the landscape there, he noted that even though “a ‘floating garden’ sounds something like eastern romance, and what you would alone expect to find in [an] Arabian story,” these were real, and “are still to be seen, though not, as in former times, in a state of cultivation.” Tudor had encountered a true engineering marvel in native America, and as his mind searched for an analogue, it naturally drifted toward the Orient. As Robert Irwin astutely observed in The
Lust of Knowing, “Orientalism developed in the shade of the much grander discourses of the Bible and of the classics.”

The West exerted a strong pull on Americans in the early nineteenth century, well before California and Oregon were touted as new Edens. By the 1840s, however, the appeal of those fair places set the popular imagination to working overtime. For most would-be settlers, however, reaching those fabled areas in the Far West required either a long sea voyage or a trek across a landscape that had not yet been named by them, a place full of Indian names and broad horizons. Stretching nearly two thousand miles from Canada down to central Texas, what we would later call the Great Plains represented a swath of steppelike land several hundred miles wide. The term *steppe* was used for the semiarid grasslands of western Asia, and the concept meshed with what travelers crossing the American plains encountered. Traveling across this belt of open land represented a physical challenge to westward-moving pioneers, but it also tested their imaginations. The interior plains of North America were far from uniform geographically, but one thing about the area—its semiaridity, evidenced by the scarcity of trees—made crossing it a memorable experience for many. Most of the time, traveling here was more emotionally tiring than physically grueling—the typical combination of plodding along worrying if the animals and vehicles would hold up, and if water and food would be available, on the westward journey. On occasion, though, it could be downright exhilarating or absolutely disastrous. It was above all romantic for the growing number of travelers who sensed they were part of a grand adventure.

In crossing a dreary country that was “destitute of trees” near the Missouri River in about 1835, travel writer extraordinaire Washington Irving noted that “the weather was threatening a change, and a snow storm on these boundless wastes might prove as fatal as a whirlwind of sand on an Arabian desert.” In equating the dangerous weather and awesome, picturesque landscapes in America with Arabia, Irving held readers spellbound. Again, it is not surprising that he used an Arabian reference for comparison; Irving was already under the spell of Orientalism at this early date and would remain so throughout his life. He, like many of his compatriots, had been weaned on bedtime stories such as *Arabian Nights* in addition to those references to the desert in the Bible. Time and time again, as they traveled westward in North America, writers made reference to Arabian or Persian tales, and with good reason. Those stories from the East provided both the aesthetic and emotional ingredients upon which romanticism thrived.

As Irving’s description suggests, the tendency to Orientalize was a result of childhood exposure to fables and adventure stories. In describing American
scenery in 1840, for example, Nathaniel Parker Willis noted that the wilder-
ness provided the traveler with “a sense of stillness and solitude, a feeling of 
retirement from the world, deeper and more affecting than he has ever felt 
before.” The limits of these scenes were “uncertain,” and the topography and 
vegetation “bewildering.” As Willis observed, or rather confessed, “thus, in a 
kind of romantic rapture, he wanders over these plains with emotions similar 
to those which, when a child, he roamed through the wilderesses created in 
Arabian tales.” This sentiment is worth highlighting, for we will see it come 
up repeatedly: if traveling into this region was like going back into time before 
civilization, travelers also turned their own personal clocks back to a time dur-
ing which they were most impressionable. It is likely no coincidence that both 
these writers and the American nation were exposed to these stories in their 
youth. In other words, America, like an impressionable youth, was collectively 
acting out a youthful fantasy of venturing into the exotic and the unknown.

As Percy B. St. John observed in 1845, this area suggested Arabia as much 
as it did America. To St. John, it was “a sweeping plain—illimitable, vast, 
sublime, flat as the Arabian desert—without brush or tree, knoll or hillock, to 
break its magnificent monotony.” In 1855, Baynard Rush Hall also described 
his earlier travels in the Illinois prairie country in Oriental terms. At that time, 
circa the 1820s, this country was part of the relatively new Louisiana Purchase. 
As Hall and his fellow travelers found themselves in a forested glade near the 
prairie, they expected quiet but instead found just the opposite—a cacopho-
nous racket of animal sounds from “bird, and beast, and insect, and reptile, 
[which] rose at our approach from the bosom of the wavy grass, to break the 
solitude of the treeless plains.” Hall found that this “uproar . . . was deafening! 
. . . bewildering.” Not missing the opportunity to place the scene in context, 
Hall noted: “How like the enchanted hills and groves of the Arabian Tales!” 
This glade in the Illinois prairie was a magical experience for Hall, who noted 
that “the solemn dark of primitive oriental forests, must have suggested to the 
Magician of the Thousand and One Nights, some of the charms and witcher-
ies and incantations that entranced our first years of boyhood and dreams!”

At its eastern margin, the Great Plains has many of the characteristics 
of a fair land: copses of trees provide shelter from intense sun, strong winds, 
and blowing snow, while streams and rivers are dependable. With almost 
every mile of travel west, however, annual precipitation and relative humidity 
decrease, trees become fewer and farther between, and challenges mount for 
the traveler on foot. In the swath of land lying between about longitude 95° 
and 103° west, average annual rainfall decreases from about 40 inches (ca. 100 
cm) to 20 inches (ca. 50 cm). To traverse the plains was literally a slow uphill
battle, for one rose in altitude from about 700 feet (213 meters) above sea level to about 5,000 feet (1,524 meters) at the base of the Rocky Mountains. Even though the region appears level to the eye throughout much of this transect, large rivers paradoxically flow through it, originating in the well-watered Rocky Mountains far to the west. In many places, the river channels are wider and deeper than their normal amount of water would imply. These rivers are called “exotic” by geographers because they originate elsewhere and cannot be sustained by the water falling along their lower reaches. They are, in fact, remnants of a time about ten thousand years ago when considerably more water coursed down them. Running water was the culprit here. It carved the land into fantastic features in places and left sandy floodplains in others. Wind also eroded some areas and deposited thick layers of fine loess in others. Thus in many places, the flatness of the plains is interrupted by steep-sided river bluffs and isolated, towering buttes—remnants of the elements shaping a semiarid area. In a land so relatively featureless, these vertical landforms became landmarks to the pioneers, as they no doubt were to the Native Americans who inhabited the region.

To westward-moving travelers, the Great Plains region was the doorstep of the great American West. The increasing aridity encountered here by travelers helped intensify the importance of greenery. It was here, in fact, that two American myths associated with the western frontier came face-to-face. As Henry Nash Smith observed, “The myth of the garden had to confront and overcome another myth of exactly opposed meaning, although of inferior strength—the myth of the Great American Desert.” These dry areas were not really deserts, but they conveyed that feeling to people looking for adventure. Because the plains were “inhabited by migratory tribesmen following their flocks and herds”—people who, in essence, “could not be integrated with American society, and were therefore perpetual outlaws”—the native inhabitants here were easy to equate with tribesmen and brigands of the Old World deserts and steppes. As Nash observed, “The analogues were often mentioned—the Bedouins of the Arabian desert, the Tartars of the Asiatic steppes.” As Peter Mason noted, painter George Catlin often portrayed the Plains Indians as draped Roman orators, and frequently gave them an even more exotic countenance by “setting them in reclining poses reminiscent of Orientalist fantasies.” And yet there was something disquieting about traversing this region. As Stephanie LeMenager noted, it represented “the interval” that Washington Irving and other writers recognized as “intractable and resistant to nationalization.” Conceptually part of the wider world rather than a part of the nation, the Great Plains was, as LeMenager concludes, “the
West’s infamous Great American Desert, the vaguely defined arid region once thought to be a warning that a United States could never fully incorporate western territories into its national domain.”

As travel writers reached the American West, they frequently used the term *American Zahara* for what they encountered. Like the Twilight Zone or other fanciful places, however, the American Zahara was not actually associated with any particular place; instead, it referred to what seemed to be the most desertlike regions that travelers encountered in the American West. Rather than having identifiable boundaries, then, the American Zahara was actually a scattering of places. These locales appeared to be—at least to imaginative travelers—much like that fabled, Old World desert that is, in fact, the largest desert in the entire world. The American Zahara kindled both the scientific and literary imaginations during the nineteenth century—a time when science and literary writing (and art) were more closely allied than they are today. These imaginings were likely based on glimpses of the Orient in travel literature and, perhaps, the West’s most enduring book about the desert, the Bible. As noted above, however, even current-day encounters with the deserts of the Old World provided plenty of drama, too.

Sometimes a mere glimpse of aridity would start travelers thinking about the Sahara. For example, while traveling across the Great Plains, the aspiring naturalist Fitz Hugh Ludlow (1836–1870) became worried that fellow travelers would think him “a little finical” (that is, finicky). Why? Because Ludlow had purchased waterproof India rubber cloth that could be made into capes to protect the group from the weather, he feared that he “perhaps resembled those Cockney travelers who take marmalade and folding bath-tubs with them across the Sahara.” Although the India rubber cloth actually “proved one of the most remunerative purchases of our outfit” because it was so versatile and easy to transport, the point here is that the Sahara served as the standard against which all deserts or desertlike regions would be measured. To judge from their writings, Arabia (which is in reality a continuation of the Sahara) was a very close second.

Although the Great Plains was fairly bleak and commonly called the Great American Desert, it was certainly not as desolate as the real Arabian or Sahara Deserts. It was what scientists would later call a cold desert in that it has a fairly severe winter, while the Sahara is a hot desert. The Great Plains also had a respectable amount of native grasses and brush. Why, then, would seemingly well-informed writers make the claim that it was as barren as Arabia or the Sahara? Drama was one motive. Writers of the period such as Irving by rendering the western American landscape hotter and more arid than it really was
also increased their own status in the eyes of admiring and sometimes envious readers. In other words, transforming portions of the American West into the Sahara or Arabia represented both flattery and conceit. If that flattery made the American desert seem even more punishing than much of it really was, conceit made the explorers traversing it seem braver than they really were. In reality, the Sahara and adjacent deserts from Arabia to Afghanistan have no match. They stretch more than five thousand miles, which is at least one and a half times the distance across the entire continental United States. A map of the Sahara in relation to American deserts having similar climatic conditions, which qualify as hot deserts (fig. 1-1), reveals how little of the United States fits that description.

As European American explorers moved even farther west, they increasingly characterized the landscapes they encountered as Oriental. For example, in describing the country bordering the interior American West, Washington Irving noted that Captain Bonneville sought to locate an expedition member named Matthieu, whom he hoped to meet at a winter camp. Accordingly, Bonneville “sent out four men, to range the country through which he would have to pass.” To confirm that this was dry, open country, Irving wrote that the “route lay across the great Snake River plain, which spreads itself out like an Arabian desert, and on which a cavalcade could be descried at a great distance.” Irving wrote this when the interior American West was gaining a reputation as a place that could be as trying as the Sahara. That name conveyed an almost oceanic expanse that was relatively flat, largely sand-covered, and almost devoid of vegetation, though little of the American West actually fits that description.

There was, however, some truth in the claims made by writers in western America that they had now encountered places like the Sahara. For despite their smaller size, American deserts can at times be as punishing as deserts on any continent. As mountain man James Ohio Pattie noted in 1849, the Indians of the western deserts were well acclimated to the region. As he observed, “They, accustomed to go naked, and to traverse these burning deserts, and be unaffected by such trials, appeared to stand the heat and drought like camels on the Arabian sands.” According to Pattie, the Native Americans here were so well adapted to the area’s desert climate that they even “tried, by their looks and gestures to encourage us, and induce us to quicken our pace. But . . .” Pattie admitted, “it was to no purpose.” These mountain men had met their match in both the native peoples and the weather of the interior West.

The Orientalization of the Great American Desert was, in a very real sense, connected to its novelty as a semiarid landscape and its frontier status in the period 1820–1870. This Orientalizing process began early on the Great
Plains, and scientists had a role in it. As early as 1819, when his expedition moved into the Arkansas River country, botanist Thomas Nuttall noted that in the area near Chickasaw Bluff, the river “was completely choked up by a bed of sand.” Here, as Nuttall put it, “we came to for the night on a sand-bar opposite the centre of the island, resembling an Arabian desert.”

After trekking through the Great Plains, travelers often continued westward into the Green River country. Here the landscape is even more barren in terms of vegetation and more spectacular topographically. In traversing this region where sedimentary rocks are perched like books of various sizes haphazardly stacked on a table, an imaginative observer such as Fitz Hugh Ludlow could justify portraying the topography, especially the “Church Buttes,” in exotic terms. Ludlow’s words are worth a closer look, for they reveal an attempt to integrate the region into a national mind-set. Distressed that landmarks like these “throughout the savage interior of the Continent” were neglected because of “their very frequency,” Ludlow chastised travelers: “We go out of our way to lavish raptures upon the temples of Yucatan, the mausolea of Dongola, Nubia, and Petraea, the Sphinx, and the Cave of Elephanta, while throughout our own mountain fastnesses and trackless plains exist ruins of architecture and statuary not one whit behind the foreign remains of forty centuries in power of execution, and far vaster in respect to age and size.” Impressed by these monumental geological features, Ludlow noted that they should be revered like ancient ruins. To do so, he astutely observed, “there was] needed an imagination of the means by which nature mimicked art after such faithful fashion, or indeed, at first glance, of the possibility that it could
be unassisted nature at all.” Ludlow was, in fact, conflicted: the scientist in him sought answers to how the landscape was shaped, but he was aware that the excitement of adventure was needed to stimulate the imagination into fully appreciating the landscape here.

Writing in 1870 when science and art—that is, objectivity and emotion—existed side by side, Ludlow advocated recognizing feelings that “will be awakened in you by natural ruins, statues, castles, temples, [and] monuments.” Letting his imagination run wild, Ludlow was admittedly “excited by the ruins of Titanic cities scattered over areas of many grassless, soilless leagues.” He confessed that this type of discovery “never lost its freshness with me; it was always a source of child-like terror and delight.” Hinting at what was going on in his deeper consciousness, Ludlow noted that “to this day I cannot analyze it, unless on the principle of affording a certain momentary argument for the supernatural. . . .” He encouraged others to consider that argument: “ere you can recover your cold literalism and modernity, your logical balance, and your grasp of philosophical explorations.” This type of experience, as he put it, “sets you back in your childhood’s or your ancestor’s marvel-world—shows you how the baby feels, how the ancients felt.” Ludlow himself emphasized that word modernity, for it was an operative factor in motivating him to seek something more wild, primeval—even frightening—in the western American landscape.

If the majestic sweep of the North American Great Plains inspired many travelers there to wax eloquent about its similarity to the Asian steppe, or even the Saharan or Arabian Deserts, they were not alone. In South America, the llanos and the pampas were equally evocative. As Domingo Sarmiento observed of the Argentine Pampas in the 1860s, “pastoral life [here] reminds us of the Asiatic plains, which imagination covers with Kalmuck, Cossack, or Arab tents.” Human society here was “essentially barbarous and unprogressive—the life of Abraham, which is that of the Bedouin of to-day prevails in the Argentine plains.” In such areas, Sarmiento observed, “progress is impossible.” In this claim, Sarmiento was referring not only to material progress, such as the development of advanced technology, but also to what he called “moral progress, and the cultivation of the intellect, [which] are here not only neglected, as in the Arab or Tartar tribe, but impossible.” Such sweeping generalizations were both common and linked to two prevalent European and European American philosophies—the cynicism of environmental determinism and the inherent fatalism of Orientalism. As Sarmiento put it, “Many philosophers have also thought that the plains prepare the way for despotism, just as mountains furnish strongholds for the struggles of liberty.”
In the United States, subliminal references to the Eastern world were made when the geographies were juxtaposed on comparative maps intended to educate the public. In comparing the size of the Old Testament world with the United States in 1884, Rand McNally placed the Old on top of the New (fig. 1-2). Interestingly, the biblical world is here positioned over a substantial portion of the Great Plains. Although it can be argued that this illustration was meant only to compare relative sizes, one subtle effect of this exercise is to also mentally transpose physical and cultural geographies; in so doing, the map viewer can indeed think that more than mere size is a factor. The semi-aridity and cultures of both the American and the Old World locales can also be equated: in this case, for example, the landscape of the Great American Desert blurs with the true desert lands of the Near East; likewise, the Indian tribes in this part of the American West (and Southwest) become, in effect, the wandering tribes of the Bible.

The comparisons, though, were more often literary than literal. The Orient, or rather stories about the Orient, provided despotism and romance aplenty for America’s westward-moving pioneers. The frontier was the perfect stage to Orientalize both setting and player. One more example regarding an easily identified, flamboyant historical figure will suffice to show the ease with which identity swapping could take place on the frontier in the nineteenth century. In the 1830s and early 1840s, when much was made of Texas’s...
status as an independent republic, the sultan of the Turkish Empire provided Texas president Sam Houston with a regal Turkish costume. Now, some leaders might simply send a “thank you” note to the sultan and put the thing in a trunk unworn. But not Sam Houston. Given his remarkably transcultural character and his penchant for theatrics, Houston enjoyed wearing the outfit around Texas, prompting one commentator to brand him the “Sultan of the Brazos”—a reference to the river upon which Texas politics was centered at the time. A sketch of the sultanly Houston amused people of the time, but the president himself was unfazed. And why not? Houston was well known and highly controversial as an outspoken supporter of Indian rights and a practitioner of other eccentric behaviors. To the amusement of some and the horror of many, Houston even went native by living among the Cherokees of Texas on occasion. Houston, in fact, personifies the romantic adventurer, an enterprising soul who was remarkably malleable in appearance. Who else would build a home in the shape of a steamboat and live in the contrivance as if it were a normal thing to do?²⁰ Such cultural experimentation reminds us, though, that the flexibility of the frontier encouraged creative role-playing. That willingness to innovate was a necessary element in the Orientalization process in frontier America.

The Texas prairie was the scene of a more serious role-playing, perceptually speaking. In describing an Indian raid on her west-central Texas farming village in October of 1864, Sallie Reynolds Matthews later recalled that “they came down [upon us] early one morning like the Assyrian host, their cohorts gleaming in war paint and feather rather than purple and gold, with their blood-curdling yells striking terror into the hearts of the little band of settlers along Elm Creek, killing men and women, and taking captive other women and children.”²¹ This came to be known as the “Elm Creek Raid,” and it is noteworthy that the Comanche perpetrators were cast as Middle Easterners. This is yet another reminder of the recasting of Native Americans into terrifying Old World raiders right out of the Old Testament, which describes “Assyrians, warriors clothed in purple” (Ezekiel 23:5–6), and the biblical association of Assyrians with the downfall of women, or rather women’s morality, is also noteworthy.

If, as hinted above, South Americans also felt compelled to Orientalize their sweeping llanos, literature and imagination helped. In his classic *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants* (1868), Sarmiento further observed that “there is something in the wilds of the Argentine territory which brings to mind the wilds of Asia.” Here, Sarmiento claimed, “the imagination discovers a likeness between the pampa and the plains lying between the
Euphrates and the Tigris; some affinity between the lonely line of wagons which crosses our wastes, arriving at Buenos Ayres after a journey lasting for months, and the caravan of camels which takes its way toward Bagdad or Smyrna.” The look of the countryside in Argentina was a factor in the similarity, for Sarmiento noted of the pampas that “these outstretched plains impart to the life of the interior a certain Asiatic coloring.” But it was also the human element that colored life here as Oriental, for the leader of such caravans here was “like the chief of an Asiatic caravan”—a man who possessed “iron will, and daring to the verge of rashness.”

Similar sentiment prevailed in North America. As Washington Irving noted in his wildly popular book *A Tour on the Prairies*, which was published in several editions after its initial run in 1835, “the capture of a wild horse is one of the most favorite achievements of the prairie tribes,” and “some fanciful speculatists have seen in them descendants of Arab stock . . . and have pleased themselves with the idea, that their sires may have been of the pure courses of the desert, that once bore Mahomet and his disciples across the sandy plains of Arabia.” For his part, Irving conceded that “the habits of the Arab seem to have come with the steed,” for the horse “changed the whole mode of living of their inhabitants.”

In the 1830s, the prairies of the southern plains in the vicinity of the Texas Cross Timbers attracted the attention of enterprising stock raisers. In describing the landscape here, Adjutant General Hugh McLeod noted that “we saw large droves of Buffalo, & wild horses, by the latter I do not mean mustangs, such as are found in Western Texas,” but much better stock. To emphasize the richness of the grassland in this part of the Republic of Texas, McLeod noted that “the Ukraine cannot excel [sic] these prairies in the beauty and fleetness of its wild horses.” To educated observers such as McLeod, the Ukraine represented some of the richest grassland in the world. It bordered on the great steppes of Asia, whose horsemen had become legendary. In the grasslands of the southern plains, the Comanche Indians had also become excellent horsemen in a surprisingly short time, perhaps less than a century, earning the name “Lords of the Plains.”

Building on a literary theme that Washington Irving had established a decade earlier—namely, the romanticizing of the “lovely prairies” and their noble, Orientalized peoples—Thomas Bangs Thorpe noted in 1846 that the mustang pony was “adapted to the prairie as perfectly as its sunshine and flowers.” These mustangs, or musteños, were wild but their heritage could be traced to the Old World. Not only did “their riders cherish the trappings for them that betray old Spain” but horse and rider perform in a manner
in “which may be traced some little of the stately tramp of the Moorish Arabian, exhibited centuries since upon the plains of the Alhambra, and pricked by enormous spurs, that rattle with a tingling sound, of which the mustang’s sides, so far from resenting the operation, seem to enjoy it as a dulled taste by luxuries requires mustard and cayenne.” Note here a touch of sadism: Thorpe relishes the idea that the horse does not resent the pain inflicted by spurs but is actually invigorated by it, much like the adventurous tongue welcomes spicy—and exotic—food. But if this sentiment seems somewhat sadistic today, that too was an element of nineteenth-century travel romance; it is both metaphorical and sensual in that its Oriental flavor is imparted by the pungent spices mentioned. Of these riders and their horses, Thorpe noted that here on the American prairie, “feats of horsemanship are performed that would delight Bedouin Arabs.”25 Similarly, in 1847, Charles Lanman easily fell into Orientalizing the Native Americans as well as their horses in the northern plains. As Lanman put it, “The Sioux Indians, . . . living as they mostly do, in a vast prairie region, their favorite and principal mode of travelling is on horseback, and away from the larger rivers, you will find them possessed of the finest horses, which they love with true Arabian affection.”26

Horses, in fact, were a key element in Orientalizing both the American Great Plains and South America’s llanos. As on the steppes of Asia, the horse, though introduced only in the 1600s, was in its element here on the American prairie. In describing Texas, which “was but little known to our countrymen, until seen by gallant bands who entered it in aid of the Patriot cause,” the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company raved that “that noble animal, the horse, roves the country in gregarious masses, with all the pride and majesty of his Arabian ancestors.”27 These were wild horses, and the association of the Texas plains with the ancestral home of the unbroken horse is part of the message: Texans, like their horses, are wild and freedom loving.

This equating of the American plains with wild and exotic areas elsewhere was common. Henry Marie Brackenridge called the American antelope “the most swift and beautiful little animal on our continent.” As Brackenridge put it, “The description of the gazel in Africa, the favorite theme of Arabian poetry, might be applied to the antelope of Missouri.” More explicitly, Brackenridge described this part of the interior American West as “a vast country inhabited only by buffaloes, deer, and wolves, [and which] has more resemblance to the fictions of the ‘Arabian Nights Entertainments’ than to reality.”28 Little did Brackenridge realize that fiction was exactly what he was writing. Like most Victorian travel writers, Brackenridge was a full-blown romanticist who could
draw parallels between the Old World and the New World whenever that Old World offered the right element of drama and excitement.

Danger was a common ingredient in spicing up encounters here. In *The Plains of the Great West* (1877), Richard Irving Dodge describes one of the most unsettling experiences that all pioneers traversing the grasslands feared. At night on the trackless prairie, a group of “emigrants” circles the wagons. Like a resting caravan, they represent civilization. However, their security is threatened by a group of tomahawk-wielding Indians stealthily moving toward the encampment like a pack of wolves. This scenario is in part the basis for subsequent dramatizations of Indians in popular Western movies, but it is based on a more enduring trope—the ever-present, highly mobile, warlike warriors who plunder all travelers crossing the limitless steppe. This is as old and as Asian as Genghis Khan, yet it played out perfectly more than seven centuries later in the American plains.29

In another popular book, the Earl of Dunraven advised travelers in the plains about the dangers of traveling in this region. Using wording similar to colonial travel narratives in the Middle East and Asia Minor, he warned: “Never trust an Indian, even though the tribe be at peace, unless you have a very good reason to know that you can do so.” To this warning, Dunraven added an enigmatic, misogynistic postscript: “It may seem surprising, but the women are at the bottom of all the mischief.” How Dunraven knew this is not disclosed, but he was not the first, nor would he be the last, to speak authoritatively about peoples he barely knew. That included characterizations of women in these tribes as either demonic or noble in a time when women in all societies were regarded with both admiration and suspicion, more often the latter. In this sense, the title of Dunraven’s book—*The Great Divide*—was emblematic. It was both a geographic metaphor for the dividing of the waters running to the Atlantic and Pacific, and a cultural metaphor for the division of peoples into civilized and primitive. It was, after all, Dunraven who characterized sunsets in the American prairies as “startling, barbaric, even savage in their brilliancy of tone.”30

Crossing the plains, many would-be settlers of the Far West first encountered the “real” wilderness and its denizens here as they migrated west. Typically, two types of literature informed them. One was decidedly romantic and Orientalist (for example, the *Arabian Nights*), the other rather more sober—but equally Oriental in origin—namely, the Bible. In an article entitled “California Again!” published in the *Arkansas Gazette* on October 27, 1845, D. G. W. Leavitt encouraged residents to move west much as a minister might inspire a congregation. In addition to bringing to mind a secular world
of Oriental despots and marauding Asiatic tribes, many moving west at the
time found that the frontier West evoked deeply spiritual feelings that they
associated with biblical literature. Leavitt’s missionary zeal, which amounted
to the assembling of an army of crusaders to move west, predated the popular
1851 slogan “Go West, young man, and grow up with the country” by John
B. L. Soule of the Terre Haute Express in Indiana. That sentiment was so strong
and so persistent that Horace Greeley (1811–1872) used it again in 1865 in
his New York Tribune. “Go West, young man,” which we now associate with
Greeley more than anyone else, was also a metaphor for the direction in which
young America was headed. In this sentiment, D. G. W. Leavitt freely called
upon the spirit of earlier pioneers, namely, those who had first sailed across
the ocean to build a new life in a new land. Urging would-be pioneers not to
worry about the California Indians or huge distances across the plains, Leavitt
noted that the move would require only the same determination exhibited by
their forefathers in the 1600s. As he put it: “The Pilgrim Fathers when they
first landed on Plymouth Rock, had not a more laudable object in view when
they left the mother country, with the ostensible purpose of worshipping God
under their own vine and fig tree, and letting others do likewise.” Leavitt’s
reference to the vine and fig tree echoed phrases in the Bible, notably Psalms
105:33 (“He smote their vines and fig trees”); Jeremiah 5:17 (“they shall eat up
your vines and fig trees”) and 8:13 (“there are no grapes on the vine, no figs on
the fig tree”); and Zechariah 3:10 (“In that day, says the Lord of hosts, every
one of you will invite his neighbor under his vine and under his fig tree”).
Significantly, and very appropriately, these were Old Testament passages that
referred to the vine and fig tree as the sustenance of a people. In these refer-
ences, God oversees what will happen to those vines and fig trees—which is to
say people—as they interact with other peoples, the environment, and God.
A righteous people, Leavitt’s message implied, had nothing to fear from “this
contemplated movement to the extreme West.”

For American pioneers, traversing the long trail westward across the plains
was in part a spiritual journey. New “sublime” vistas and unique landscapes
helped generate euphoria among some travelers. In June 1846, Edwin Bryant
wrote a friend about his experiences on the Oregon Trail: “For a distance of
300 miles after we left Independence, the prairies presented to the eye a rich
and varied landscape, surpassingly beautiful and grand.” In seeking to inform
his friend about the majesty of this landscape, Bryant continued: “It would
almost seem as if the Deity had lain himself out in arranging a garden of
illimitable extent to shame the puny efforts of man.” Then, too, the experi-
ence of traveling west might even encourage a pioneer to change religions—or
become religious after lapsing, or “backsliding.” In writing to James Frazier Reed while on the way west, James M. Maxey observed that “I will say to you that it made me feel good when I opened your letter and saw that you said Bro[ther] for since you seen me I have become a member of the E M. Church and I think a Christian—I can tell you mor [sic] when I see you.” Ending his letter with “I remain Your Obt Bro,” Maxey had evidently found faith on the trail west. The point here is that for many, perhaps most, pre-Gold Rush pioneers, religion and faith played a role in the westward move. That interest in religion coupled with increasing aridity naturally led people to recall the locations of the original biblical stories.

The landscape of the American West became more evocative and challenging with each day of travel. Where erosion had leveled all but the most resistant of rocks, westbound travelers passed by several awesome spires—Courthouse Rock, Jail Rock, Castle Rock, Chimney Rock, and Scotts Bluff—in about a week’s time. This presented them with their first look at landscape features typical of semiarid lands. On his way west across the Great Plains, Horace K. Whitney was one of several Mormon pioneers who took an interest in Chimney Rock and other erosional features. As he looked through a telescope to get a better view of the hulking spires, he noted that “the scene to us was truly one of magnificence and grandeur and almost baffles description.” The word “almost” was operative here, for Whitney was a talented writer and not hesitant to try his hand at lavish prose. “The whole scene . . .” as he put it, “was one of romantic solitude and inspired me with singular feelings and reminding [sic] me forcibly of the descriptions I had read in my boyish days of the fortified castles and watchtowers of the older time.” If the landscape of the West seemed familiar, a revisiting of the adventure stories and tales of youth, it also had powerful religious overtones. And yet something about these landscapes seemed spiritually disquieting. To some, the landscape seemed in disarray, as large, angular boulders littered the slopes and caused travelers to wonder how they came to be placed there. By flood—particularly the flood? By fire and brimstone that accompanied volcanic activity? A traveler in the same company described the phenomenon more or less accurately, but then quickly added a spiritual hypothesis when he speculated that these “huge rocks . . . had been rolled out of their natural place by the wash of heavy rains or the convulsive throes of nature at the crucifixion of our Saviour.”

The natural wonders of the Great Plains increased toward the base of the Rocky Mountains, where rock strata might be pushed skyward into seemingly bizarre features like Colorado’s “Garden of the Gods,” in which huge slabs of red sandstone protrude upward at steep angles. The name sounds picturesque,
perhaps even playful to us today, but those who named the place recognized its awesome countenance. In describing the varied features of this geological wonderland of sandstone layers, a guide for the Kansas Pacific Railway noted that “its deep chasms and lofty sides, and great stone, of every hue and shape, amaze the beholder.” Some of the garden’s features are “towering crags and lofty stones set upon end, some inclined like the leaning tower of Pisa, and others erect as was Cleopatra’s Needle on Bunker Hill having its own peculiar color.” This monumental geological wonder, the guide noted, is “mightier than [the] Chinese wall.” In keeping with the popular tendency to view the Native Americans as kin to Asians, especially given the terms *India* (or *Indian*) *red* and *China* (or *Chinese*) *red*, the landscape was easy to anthropomorphize. “The stone fence,” as the writer put it, was “a solid wall of red sandstone, very thick in comparison with its frightful altitude.” Using a painterly comparison to drive home a cultural prejudice, the writer added: “It was painted red, perhaps that it might endure and gratify the taste of savage red men.”

The equating of people and place was common. It is evident in Washington Irving’s 1836 description of the Métis, or half-breeds, on America’s western frontier. These “new and mongrel races,” Irving observed, are “like new formations in geology.” Continuing the analogy, Irving considered them to be “the amalgam of the ‘debris’ and ‘abrasions’ of former races, civilized and savage, the remains of broken and almost extinguished tribes.” Note that Irving here integrates time as well as space in equating this human detritus with the geological debris that veneers the landscape itself. Like the rocks here, which were splintering under the inevitable cycles of freeze and thaw, wet and dry, the native peoples appeared to be fragmenting in the face of western expansion.

Because travelers at this time were familiar with the Bible and a growing travel literature about the Near East, the landscape and peoples along the route took on the character of that distant locale. Even Chimney Rock in Nebraska was given an Eastern countenance as travelers recalled the landmarks of the Near East. As he described “the celebrated Chimney Rock” in the early 1850s, American writer Franklin Langworthy observed: “It is a noted landmark, being visible forty miles each way up and down the river.” Although Chimney Rock was seven miles from the road, Langworthy noted that “many travelers go out to survey its curiosities.” Why? One reason Langworthy gave stands out:

The chimney, or column, rises from a pyramid of immense size, as regular in form as those of Egypt. The column rises several hundred feet from the apex of the pyramid, and as to size, is in very exact architectural proportions to the size of the base on which it stands. At a distance, the
chimney has a tall and slender appearance, like the minaret of a mosque, or the smoke-pipe of a steamer. Around the base of the column are inscribed the names of multitudes of persons who have from time to time visited this colossal wonder.\textsuperscript{38}

Note, especially, that the language here celebrates rather than denigrates features and accomplishments of the Middle East. Travelers like Langworthy were prone to see ancient ruins such as the spectacular Cleopatra’s Needle in the topography west of the Mississippi River. To imaginative travelers, these natural rock columns appeared to be replicas of the famed obelisks of Egypt, some of which had already been transported to cities in Europe.\textsuperscript{39}

As cultural historian Neil Harris noted in \textit{The Artist in American Society} (1966), the obelisk proliferated in early nineteenth-century America as a monument to heroic deeds. After a design competition, the obelisk was finally chosen for the Bunker Hill and Washington Monuments because of its simplicity. As an architect put it, the obelisk “was complete in itself.” Nevertheless, considerable debate swirled around the obelisk as a symbol. In particular, the virtues of the obelisk and the column were debated in regard to which of these vertical forms was better suited for commemoration in America. Although columns were associated with Greek and Roman classical culture and architecture, the obelisk was of “greater antiquity [and] it also furnished a better surface for inscriptions.” Nevertheless, the obelisk was associated with Egyptian architecture, which, as one architect put it, was considered by some to be the “architecture of tyrant kings—of severe and despotic dynasties [and] it therefore can never harmonize with the glorious principles of republican achievement, nor with . . . Christianity.” Interestingly, some authorities rather brazenly argued that the obelisk should be used precisely because it was Egyptian and would now be employed in a more noble venture—the veneration of American heroes. That, coupled with the notion of the obelisk’s great antiquity and singular form, won the day. As a brochure for the Bunker Hill Monument Association put it, with emphasis on height and durability, the obelisk monument “will be the highest of the [sic] kind in the world, and only below the height of the Pyramids.” When experiencing it, “no traveler will then inquire for the battleground . . . [and] it will endure until the foundations are shaking.” The association concluded that “it will stand uninjured to the ends of time.” This zeal was deeply connected to a concern about America’s inferiority—it was, after all, a young nation with much to prove—and also to a growing sense of American exceptionalism.\textsuperscript{40}

These concerns were palpable, in part, because of the grand setting—or challenge—provided by nature on the North American continent. It was,
as Harris notes, “actually an attempt [by Americans] to come to terms with their gigantic forests and rivers.” As one observer put it, nature in America was overpowering, “and so giving a certain tristesse . . . and on it man seems not able to make much of an impression.” Harris concludes that “with their giant monuments, Americans had made such an attempt: art presented its first statement” in coming to grips with “such power and grandeur.” Significantly, an Oriental (Near Eastern) monument was selected.

Farther west, an even grander landscape called for superlatives, for which Egypt would again provide a ready reference. As he traversed the splintered, rocky landscape near what we today call the City of Rocks just south of the Snake River plain in southern Idaho (fig. 1-3a), Langworthy described obelisk-like topographic features with patently Orientalist enthusiasm: “In sight of, and near our road,” he wrote, “are two tall and sharp pointed columns, two or three hundred feet in apparent height, their forms being regular and beautifully elongated cones.” Whereas the original Egyptian obelisks were about seventy feet high, these would do just fine. Langworthy continued: “Here are monuments erected by the hands of Nature, rivaling in grandeur Trajan’s Pillar, or Cleopatra’s Needle.” He then added another tempting
Fig. 1-3b. An illustration from J. W. Dawson’s *Modern Science in Bible Lands* (1889) shows the “Apex of the great prostrate obelisk of Queen Hatsu of Karnak . . . [and] . . . the ruins of a temple of Nubian sandstone.”
thought: “Further [sic] back on the Fort Hall road, I am told is a succession of these steeples, filling a narrow valley for two or three miles.” Like many writers of the period, Langworthy did not reveal how he learned about the ancient ruins he so readily compared to the natural rock formations in Idaho. Illustrations of Old World ruins were relatively rare at this time but would soon become common. It is just as likely that Langworthy and others were inspired by the poetic prose of travel writers, whose words could sufficiently prime a traveler in the West to imagine a connection between the jumbled rock formations here and ancient counterparts strewn along the Nile Valley.

Langworthy’s delightful travel writing represents a combination of firsthand experience and hearsay. The very concept of such ancient steeples being part of the natural American landscape evoked pride. Moreover, the prospect of numerous obelisks filling a narrow valley for miles sounds much like American and European descriptions of the rich archaeological treasures littering Egypt’s Nile Valley for mile after mile (fig. 1-3b). It is almost as if the western United States deserved to possess such spectacular features that could be observed from the adjacent plains. With so much sweeping natural scenery and so few permanent—that is masonry—Indian villages, the area seemed the right place to imagine such grand artifacts. These could in effect impart an ancient, even noble, quality to an otherwise wild land. Through the process of creating, or rather adopting, their surrogates in nature’s wonderlands, obelisks soon graced maps of the frontier West from Wisconsin (where a rock spire called Cleopatra’s Needle stands in the Wisconsin Dells), to the interior American West, where the “steeples” that Langworthy wrote about adorn the landscape. By imaginatively transforming these natural features into obelisk-like steeples, the drama of great accomplishments could be reenacted in the American landscape.

The Orientalizing of the American interior served many purposes. One of them involved the new nation’s search for identity in relation to other nations. Since the founding of the United States, and especially in the early to mid-nineteenth century, the general belief that “nations are purposive agents in God’s historical drama” came to be more specific. It was now believed that God “deduced a special role for the United States.” By the late nineteenth century, it would come to mean something even more exceptional, namely, that the United States “was the chosen instrument to move the world toward solidarity and righteousness.” With a new frontier expanding outward, American society exhibited “centrifugal tendencies that were essential for the fulfillment of their high missions.” Selectively adopting elements from venerable Eastern religious and spiritual traditions helped endorse this impulse.
Religion and spirituality were never far from the mind of the famed British explorer Sir Richard F. Burton. Neither was the Orient. As he reached Kansas on his well-publicized trip across the United States in 1860, Burton began to find himself in increasingly familiar country despite the fact that he had never been there before. Burton described the covered wagons crossing the plains as “those ships of the great American Sahara which, gathering in fleets at certain seasons, conduct the traffic between the eastern and western shores of a waste which is everywhere like a sea and which presently will become salt.” In describing the protection worn by the drivers (“rippers”) of these wagons, Burton noted that those whose eyes got sore here may “line the circumorbital region with lamp-black, which is supposed to act like the Surma or Kohl of the Orient.” In the more arid sections of the western plains, Burton’s Orientalism reached a high point aimed at dramatizing the difficulties of travel. The country here had “a burnt-up aspect,” and, as Burton put it, for as “far as the eye could see the tintage was that of the Arabian desert, sere and tawny as a jackal’s back.” Of the Pawnees, whose villages were destroyed by the Sioux, Burton noted, “They are Ishmaelites, whose hand is against every man.” However, he also observed that “they and the northern Dokotas can never be trusted” because they were the kind of Indians who, “African-like, will cut the throat of a sleeping guest.” By contrast, Burton noted that “most Indian races, like the Bedouin Arabs, will show hospitality to the stranger who rides into their villages, though no point of honor deters them from robbing him after he has left the lodge-shade.” Noting that the term Red Men was really a misnomer for Indians, Burton observed that “the real color of the skin, as may be seen under the leggings, varies from a dead pale olive to dark dingy brown” but that “the parts exposed to the sun are slightly burnished, as in a Tartar or an Affghan [sic] after a summer march.” Burton noted that the Indian’s physiognomy “renders it impossible to see this people for the first time without the strongest impressions that they are of the Turanian breed which in prehistoric ages passed down from above the Himalayas as far as Cape Comorin.” As if to provide evidence of this Oriental connection, Burton noted that the Indians’ fringed leather targes “reminded me of those in use amongst the Bedouins of El Hejaz.”

As Burton traveled westward into the high plains, he too encountered the spectacular erosional features along the Platte River. This was familiar country, or at least Burton thought so. “On the far bank of its northern fork . . .” he wrote, “lay a forty-mile stretch of sandy, barren, glaring, heat-reeking ground, not unlike that which the overland traveller looking southwards from Suez sees.” International travelers like Burton brought the Near East into the
American West by comparing what they saw with what they had experienced elsewhere. Nebraska’s famed geological feature called the Courthouse (now Courthouse Rock), which towered three hundred feet above the area, appeared to Burton not like a courthouse at all. Because it possessed “the shape of an irregular pyramid, whose courses were inclined at an ascen
dable angle of 35°, with a detached outwork composed of a perpendicular mass based upon a slope of 45°; in fact, it resembled the rugged earthworks of Sakkara, only it was more rugged.” Burton thought nearby Chimney Rock was accurately named but then improved on that, calling it a “Pharos of the prairie sea” that erosion had reduced from a towering 150 to 200 feet above its surroundings to a mere 35 feet. As Burton continued traveling west here, the weather also contributed to his Oriental fantasies. It “changed from our usual pest—a light dust-laden breeze—into a Punjaubian dust-storm, up the valley of the Platte.” The weather worsened, and soon “the gale howled . . . with all the violence of a Khamsin, and it was followed by lightning and a few heavy drops of rain.” Burton noted that the Mauvaises Terres (Badlands) were compared by some to Gibraltar, the national capitol, or even Stirling Castle in Scotland; however, as a consummate Orientalist, he “could think of nothing in its presence but the Arabs’ ‘City of Brass,’ that mysterious abode of bewitched infidels, which often appear at a distance to the wayfarer toiling under the burning sun, but ever alludes [sic] his nearer search.” Still farther west, on the Wyoming plains, Burton observed that “the land became more barren,” and dead cattle, their “skins, mummified, as it were, by the dry heat, lay life-like and shapeless, as in the Libyan Desert, upon the ground.” Like Burton, many Americans’ experiences in the Great Plains plumbed memories of the Old World’s semiarid grasslands, though they were more often from biblical or popular literature, or perhaps even Burton’s own books, than from firsthand experience.

In searching for Old World analogues in New World deserts, travelers equated what was in fact a relatively small section of arid land—compared to the real Sahara, at least—with the world’s largest desert. That process enabled both North America and those who experienced it to undergo a transformation. Travelers convinced themselves that the American experience was similar to Old World exploration. This, as suggested above, both flatters the new (that is, American) locale and empowers travelers here to compare themselves to their counterparts in the Old World. In the case of Sir Richard Burton, the comparison was genuine enough because Burton had experienced both. However, for the most part, these comparisons were yet another way of perpetuating the mysteries of the East in light of a stark reality: the world was running out of places to explore. Nostalgia, then, was a factor in
the Orientalization of the West. But just as that nostalgia had its roots in
the explorer’s childhood, the increasing age and growing maturity of both
explorer and industrial society ensured that the sights (and sites) experienced
were endangered by the cultural-geographical realization that the world was
becoming smaller, and its exotic features endangered, with every mile traveled
and described.

Another aspect of these western lands that seemed to link the region
with the Middle East was the occasional outbreaks of ravenous locusts. They
swarmed, darkening the skies, devouring all vegetation in their path, and
bringing to mind the swarms of locusts in the Bible. How devastating were
these swarms in the western United States? In 1876, locusts were identified by
the US Congress as “the single greatest impediment to the settlement of the
country.”\footnote{This, it should be noted, was the same year in which Custer met
defeat at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The reference to locusts resonated
with a culture raised on biblical stories, for they darken the sky on occasion
in that book, usually either as an omen or as retribution, though locusts and
honey suggest yet another connection.}

In the nineteenth century, it was common to use the ancient world, espe-
cially ancient Egypt, as a reference for what was encountered in the American
West. The rivers flowing through the plains were frequently compared with
their Oriental counterparts. In 1881, a promotional book about Texas declared,
in the bragging manner that would soon characterize Texas overstatement
generally: “The Nile has made Egypt famous for her fertility for ages,” but in
central Texas, “the Brazos and Colorado [Rivers] bring down richer sediments
than the Nile.” That comparison suggested, or promised, agricultural wealth,
but even the countryside or landscape called for comparisons, and Egypt was
again the benchmark. The same guide promoting Texas described the land-
scape of adjacent Indian Territory, namely the “slightly undulating prairie, out
of which granite peaks rise in gigantic masses like the pyramids of Egypt.”\footnote{This was no idle or idiosyncratic perception, but one that was widely held.}

Historian David Wrobel confirmed that popular attitudes about the
American West occurred in several phases. In the first, people tended to see the
positive aspects of wild places; thus the Mississippi River could be perceived as
the Nile, and towns along it named Cairo (Illinois) and Memphis (Tennessee).
As time passed and the settling of the frontier became a reality, however, they
tended to romanticize those early landscapes as more barren and harsh than
they had really been. That configures the notion of the West, the entire region
west of the Mississippi River, as a place that called for a counterpoint to the
Arabian Desert, namely, the garden; not just any garden, actually, but rather
the mother of all gardens—the Garden of Eden. The terms garden and paradise were used with such frequency in the nineteenth century that they became clichés. Yet that gardenlike place was based on an interesting and even somewhat conflicted premise about not only the landscape but also the human populations that occupied it.

In fact, the very notion of Eden, a garden where fruit grew on trees that needed no tending, was a double-edged sword to a nation devoted to a Protestant work ethic. One edge of the blade confirmed the ingenuity of the swordsman, but the other left its deep ideological wound on the indigenous peoples of these arid lands. In the 1880s, the Honorable John Runnels, an Iowan, reflected on pioneer times, noting that his state was once a “desolate wilderness,” but that it had become as verdant and productive “as the Garden of Eden.” However, in the worst sense of Orientalist ethnocentrism, Runnels believed that the American spirit had been the source of the achievement and that peoples of the Middle East could never achieve that type of progress. As he put it, even though “the nations of the East opened their eyes to lands flowing with milk and honey,” the people there were “slothful, self-indulgent, and effeminate.” Runnels added that “progress was unknown; invention was unheard of, liberty slept and despotism was law.”

That suggests that sometime during the nineteenth century, as pioneers were crossing the Great Plains, attitudes began to change. Whereas many of the early pioneers had found what they thought was Eden awaiting their touch (and God’s endorsement), they now, in retrospect, reimagined the land they had encountered as a wasteland—wasteland that they had transformed as no other people had, or ever could. This was related to mythmaking about the environment and an inflation of the early settlers’ skills. In other words, with the passage of time, mythmaking tended to distance American westerners from their more humble roots as pioneers who were pretty much given the West; now, they viewed it as a hard-earned victory that distanced them both from the more lowly peoples of the East and from the lowly Indians who had possessed it.

Interestingly, Runnels’s comment about “effeminate” peoples of the East—meaning their men were weak—is quite revealing. The garden of earthly delights is associated with Adam and Eve and with the latter plucking the apple (fruit of knowledge) from the tree in defiance of God’s command. Runnels seems to be saying that it takes, or rather took, a real man to transform the wilderness—and that those men of the East were not up to the challenge. The conflict runs deeper than simple racism, then, and points to fundamental changes in gender relations—namely, the reinterpretation of western
American history as a “man’s work.” This gendering of the western agricultural landscape as a male achievement runs against a very long tradition, for in reality, while mining and logging (and to a lesser extent ranching) were men’s work, women have always had a place in the garden anywhere, be it East or West. As landscape architect Catherine Howett succinctly put it, “One need hardly demonstrate that a mythology linking the feminine with the garden is as old as civilization.”

There is considerable evidence that women took part in branding the western frontier as the Garden itself—a role that Annette Kolodny interprets in *The Land Before Her*. Kolodny’s subtitle—*Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860*—suggests that considerable mythology was involved in making the western American frontier into Eden. The process was simultaneous with the first arrival of Anglo-Americans. In promoting Texas in 1831, for example, Mary Austin Holley claimed that she had discovered a “land literally flowing with milk and honey,” while a decade later Margaret Fuller claimed that she had discovered “the very Eden which earth might still afford.” Kolodny calls such open landscapes “the prairie Eden” and links them to deeply embedded notions of a “promised land laid out as an earthly paradise.”

In the vicinity of the hundredth meridian, though, the Great Plains becomes sufficiently semiarid that it is more realistic to tend animals than farm the land. Consequently, ranching became the dominant form of land use here. Significantly, ranching was one of those activities that grafted an Old World identity onto a new land. In his sweeping interpretation of the cowboy origins of the western American, historian Donald Worster reminds us just how eclectic identity can be. As Worster put it, “We ought to begin by getting outside our regional provincialisms, overcoming our insistence on American uniqueness, and trying to situate the cattleman and his ranch in the broad panorama of human adaptation to the earth.” We tend to think of cowboys as western American figures, but in fact they derive from the East, more particularly southwestern Asia, where livestock were first domesticated and where nomadic herding is still a significant activity. After all, the hackamore bridle is believed to have originated in the Persian-Arabian world as the *hakma*. From that area, ranching spread throughout the world, transforming the ecology everywhere it became a major activity. For most people, though, ranching is the quintessential occupation in the American West. The ranching culture was surprisingly multicultural, and that helped observers imagine its distant Old World roots.

When W. J. Palmer’s wood engraving called *Driving Cattle into a Corral*...
in the Far West appeared as a stunning two-page illustration in the September 11, 1875, issue of Harper’s Weekly (fig. 1-4), it codified an image that was long in the making. The engraving’s action is what first captures our attention. Palmer positions a whip-wielding wrangler toward the center, and the focus of the whip’s attention, a longhorn, hunkers down for the next lashings. Other wranglers likewise crack whips to cajole the stock into the corral, but two additional elements make this scene noteworthy. First, the corral is a series of tall pickets that mirror the verticality of the rugged backdrop of mountains. That backdrop is reminiscent of the broken rhyolite palisades behind Fort Davis, Texas, but might be anywhere (and nearly everywhere) in the West. But then again, the scene suggests something about another land—one far distant where ranching got its start. This, we know instantly from the absolute absence of vegetation and the presence of dust that creates a slight haze everywhere, is a land where water is scarce.

The second element, however, is even more important, and that is the physical appearance of these wranglers. The wrangler at the center of our attention wears what appears to be a military hat, but his facial features, including his full beard, suggest someone who could be Chinese, Mongolian, or even Anglo-American. The place and the job have rendered him both indigenous and exotic. To the left of the engraving, two wranglers reel their ponies around in anticipation of the longhorn’s next move. They are likely Indians, but then again their facial features suggest that they could just as easily be from the Asian steppe. At the right of the engraving, a wrangler wearing a hooded vest appears strangely serene, an anchor of sorts amid the swirling action. This man’s clothing draws our attention, for he appears to be as much a monk as a cowboy—and would be at home in any desert frontier—the Pecos, Patagonia, or Persia. At the far right, an Indian woman in an intricately patterned dress watches the cattle being driven toward the dust-shrouded opening of the corral. Her dress is exotic, apparently American Indian, but then again reminiscent of the women’s dress in Afghanistan, where tightly woven, abstract patterns also dominate textiles and dress. Driving Cattle is remarkable both for the clarity of the delineation of its subjects and for its ambiguity about who these people are.

The truth is, this enigmatic engraving is characteristically western American—which is to say, it reflects a vagueness about ethnic identity by making everyone vaguely ethnic. The cowboy, of course, is much the same. He was in reality as likely to be part Mexican, African American, American Indian, and Anglo-American. It is noteworthy that both a first and last look at this engraving make one wonder about two things: Where in the world is this
event taking place? And, who in the world are the people in it? The answer, of course, is that it is both Western and Eastern—and its subjects both westerners and easterners. That is so because Palmer worked both from real life and from vivid imagination in creating this image. In Driving Cattle he provides a masterful look at how ambiguous identity could be on the American western frontier. That ambiguity made it relatively easy to configure the West, and westerners, into an imagined Orient.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the geographic gaze was opening to the West, across sweeping prairies and into the Rocky Mountains. As the doorstep to the American West, the Great Plains resonated as increasingly strange and exotic country to a westward-moving nation. With its aura of wilderness and lawlessness, this part of the western American frontier was easily equated with, and translated into, more dangerous locales. Naturally, the Near East, with its tribes organized under warlords, was a likely candidate for comparison. As the transcontinental railroad moved closer to completion in 1868–69, reporters frequently commented on the “hell on wheels” character of tent camps at the temporary end-of-track. These were places that brought out the worst and most interesting in human behavior. They certainly appalled many observers at the time. Given the near obsession with the Orient at this time, it should come as no surprise that these observers often conflated what they experienced here with what could be found in the Near East and southwestern Asia.

Sometimes this Orientalizing amounted to sermonizing, and it is here we often encounter Orientalism as negative—a demonization of peoples living with less supervision and authority beyond the edges of civilization. Here the control by Judeo-Christian religion seemed tenuous if not altogether absent. As a writer for the Boston Traveler put it in August 1868, “The old cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah were as nothing compared with these new cities of the plain.” The writer continued, “Everything in the way of society is chaotic, ‘and nothing is but what is not.’” And yet moral progress would ultimately arrive here, at least the writer hoped, and “in place of the gambling house and the brothel, we will see the school house and the church.”

Of “tent towns” such as Bryan, which was located in the increasingly bleak prairie about eight hundred miles west of Omaha, a correspondent for the National Republican reported that “you can find houses that have been put up and taken down fifteen or twenty times.” The reporter did not mince words in describing the inhabitants. “The people who live in them,” he observed, “are American Arabs.” Lest readers think he was merely referring to their mobility, the reporter was very specific: “They are not only nomads, ever on the move, but they can steal and plunder as adroitly and with as little
Fig. 1-4. Containing elements that seem as southwestern Asian as western American, this wood engraving by W. J. Palmer titled *Driving Cattle into a Corral in the Far West* appeared in *Harper’s Weekly* in September, 1875.
compunction of conscience as their brethren the Bedouins.” These people, he noted, were a “crowd of railroad followers” who, he concluded, “are here to gather up the spoils which pass from the treasury of the company through the workmen into their hands.” Note several ironies in this statement. It is the railroad company that provides the opportunity to live here and yet also provides the booty which is ultimately plundered, either by thievery or gambling. The ultimate irony here, of course, is that the “American Arabs” are not Arabs at all but shiftless Anglo-Americans with no permanent employment who live opportunistically.

This characterization transcends race and yet is dependent on it through stereotyping. The racial dimension is palpable in that it seems a perfect metaphor for the colonial coffers overseas that are raided by indigenous, nonwhite nomads; this was an increasingly common theme in news reports about the difficulties in administering colonies in the Middle and Far East. Note, too, that these nomads living along the transcontinental railroad were inherently mistrusted for more than their uncivilized behavior, which is to say they had seemingly surrendered their white European (or in this case, Euro-American) identity. Even though they may in fact have been Caucasian, they had lost that identity by adopting the negative traits of “other” races. This type of accusation, of course, was common in the Victorian period, when good citizenship entailed obedience to the law, loyalty to government and corporation, and good standing in an orderly, permanent community. To fail to achieve this standing was to be, or become, not only nomadic but also ethnic, like the wandering Jew, the ever-moving Comanche, or—as in this case—the footloose Bedouin. It is, in retrospect, probably less racist than it is an indictment of lifestyle.

The Orientalist characterization of nomadic peoples here is somewhat harsher than it would have been in the 1830s, but then again it is based on a more worldly, but increasingly cynical, attitude that occurred when Americans came into contact with not only real Arabs in the Holy Land but also French and British colonizers abroad. For their part, a number of the correspondents in the American West were actually Europeans who were only too happy, but also primed, to discover the barbarism of the exotic foreign land in frontier America along the rails of the Pacific Railroad. This suggests that the outlaw-like “Bedouins” and “Arabs” were fanciful conceits aimed at making the West seem more exotic and more dangerous using literary devices well honed by European explorers and travelers.

From the window of that new wonder of technology—a transcontinental train—much of the prairie and desert West seemed bleak indeed, and one
might blame this on expectations raised by the early Orientalists. With other early travel writers in mind, perhaps, one traveler found himself Orientalizing the Great Plains. Expecting to discover, much as he might in Egypt, “that a sphinx and a half score of pyramids were located upon it,” he was disappointed to find virtually nothing of interest there. Given the vast expanses of grassland, the few topographic features present were often seized upon as landmarks. With little or no vegetation to conceal them, these landmarks not only stood out but were testimonials to the power of water, frost, and wind to render stone into unique shapes. To imaginative travelers, they could be seen as steamboats and ships, but they were just as likely to become sentinels, ramparts, towers, and other architectural features right out of travel literature. As Lt. E. G. Beckwith candidly noted while exploring the area near the Green River, “Where no sign of vegetation exists, is the appearance of an unfinished fortification, on a scale which is pleasing to the imagination.”

Even professional surveyors were not immune from the temptation to succumb to the power of the plains to stimulate the imagination. In 1872, Joseph Nelson Garland Whistler directed the westward survey of the Northern Pacific railroad. This Civil War veteran, who longed for service in the eastern United States but spent many years in the plains, seemed jaded at times. Whistler, though, could appreciate the grandeur of the western scenes he encountered, and the badlands provided plenty to comment on. Whistler noted in his report that “the sight was magnificent beyond anything we had yet seen or hoped to see.” Here, where the streams had removed thick layers of sediments that had been deposited over the badlands, strange shapes presented themselves in about 250 feet of multicolored formations. Whistler was impressed by this rugged topography, and the incised route he traveled “so resembled a street that the men were calling [i.e., naming] the different points after large hotels . . . some vast dome-shaped hills rose out of the valley resembling Mosques, [while] others looked like gasometers.” By gasometer, Whistler meant a burette, which is a graduated cylindrical device used for measuring the flow of liquids or gases. Note how the term Mosque is used with other more common words, a reminder of how easily the exotic was integrated with the commonplace in Victorian America. And yet this vivid description relates to the artistic sentiments of the time, Whistler’s first cousin being none other than the famous artist James McNeill Whistler.

Travelers moving across, and scientists exploring, the Great Plains found much to ponder at sights like these “Mauvaises Terres,” or Badlands, where, as geologist Alexander Winchell put it in 1871, “Nature seems to have collected together the relics of a geological age, and buried them in one vast sepulcher” (fig. 1-5).
same Winchell was not only the director of the Michigan Geological Survey and a professor of geology, zoology, and botany at the University of Michigan but also a devout Christian. In his book titled *Sketches of Creation*, Winchell cited the imaginative interpretation of Dr. Evans, “an eminent geologist who almost ‘dwelt among the tombs’ of the ancient world, as they lie stretched out from the Mississippi to the Pacific shores.” Evans noted that “these rocky piles, in their endless succession, assume the appearance of massive artificial structures, decked out with all the accessories of buttress and turret, arched doorway and clustered shaft, pinnacle, and finial, and tapering spire.” To add to the poignant element of greatness-gone-to-ruin here in such landscapes, Winchell noted that one could find intriguing fossil bones. These, he observed, contributed to the feeling that the traveler was “walking upon the floor of a long-deserted and ruined vault.” Here, as he put it, “skulls, and jaws, and teeth, and thigh-bones lie scattered about,” giving the impression that “Death has indeed held a carnival here, and [that] this is the deserted scene of a ghastly repast.” Leaving little doubt about the source of inspiration here, Winchell imaginatively characterized such places as “Golgotha”—the site of death and betrayal in the Bible.66

The ageless Orient had considerable appeal to Winchell, who characterized the beds of stratified rock from the Carboniferous Period metaphorically. He was so impressed with what these layers of rock could reveal about
“world-ideas” here that he stated, “The vaults of the Pyramids recite a history less full of meaning.” That, in 1871, was quite a claim, but he went on to explain just how ethereal Earth history could be: “To the soul that holds communion with the visible ideas that dwell about him,” Winchell observed, “these rocky walls are vocal with narratives of earthquake and flood, of nodding verdure and of desolating surge; these shales are the tombstones of generations, on which are inscribed chronologies whose minutes are the cycles of the Hindoo.”67 That reference to Hindoo is a reminder that India was recognized as one of the world’s most interesting and exotic locales. The reference is not only Orientalist but philosophically significant. At just this time, scholars like Winchell were fascinated by the concept of enduring cycles of birth, death, and rebirth that are so deeply embedded in Eastern religion generally and in Hinduism in particular. It is here that Orientalism again reveals its deep fascination with time. Reference is often made to ruins, past grandeur, and the like. Soon, however, a more strictly scientific community would effectively banish such imaginative interpretations to the realm of art and literature. Romanticism continued to influence people into the early twentieth century, and under its guise a common traveler could inspire others to imagine themselves in a simultaneously timeless and yet very time-conscious scene.68

If the open landscape of the semiarid American West suggested the Sahara, Arabia, Mongolia, or other exotic locales, that in turn suggested the more uninhibited sexuality of the barbarians who lived in those distant lands. This too played out in space and time. The increasingly sexualized role of the Orient in the United States has a long history. Whereas the Indian captivity narratives offered by whites on the East Coast were originally portrayed as biblical dramas, by the mid to late nineteenth century, they came to possess more of the Victorian-era obsession with lurid sex. In other words, the latter perfectly coincided with the opening of the far western frontier. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, the prospect of capture by Plains Indians was associated with sexual enslavement of women. While such captivity became less likely in the 1880s, the fear and fascination remained, as is evident in both literature and art.

But it was the prospect of indigenous female sexuality that also resonated in the steppe and desert areas of the American West. Building on a technique mastered by French painters, American artists and their patrons became enchanted by odalisques (beautiful young women, perhaps from harems) in sensuous poses. In Orientalist paintings such as Frederick Arthur Bridgman’s The Siesta (1878) (fig. 1-6), a pipe is often placed nearby, yet another suggestion of the pleasures of the Orient.69 By 1896, when artist Charles M. Russell painted a remarkable image of Keeoma, the link between native people and
sexuality had become a staple fantasy in American culture (fig. 1-7). Russell, of course, was a prominent painter of western American scenes, but *Keeoma* playfully mixes genres. Languidly lounging like an odalisque in a French Oriental painting, or even in Bridgman’s earlier copy of one, the Native American plains woman captures one’s immediate attention. In a setting that is otherwise rich in Native American symbolism and looks much like the interior of any tepee, one encounters a woman of Orientalistically inspired appearance and demeanor. Even though she is nominally Indian, her clothing seems more sensuous and lavish than typical Plains Indian dress. Clearly, the woman, or perhaps we should say Russell himself, has taken a cue from the Orientalist painters who found real odalisques so irresistible as subjects. The model for *Keeoma*, however, was none other than Russell’s own wife, though her features suggest as much a Middle Eastern woman as a Plains Indian. Note, too, the long, exotic-looking pipe lying next to Keeoma.

In Russell’s painting of *Keeoma*, the pipe helps establish an Oriental context. Russell was clearly playing with the Orientalists’ clichés here (odalisque in languid pose, pipe at the ready to satisfy or intoxicate) in order to convey a sense of the exotic and the erotic. However, the exotic was none other than the indigenous Native American, who by 1896 had lost much of his or her aura of

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**Fig. 1-6.** Painted by American artist Frederick Arthur Bridgman, *The Siesta* (1878) builds on the French tradition of depicting a sensuous Middle Eastern odalisque reclining in an exotic setting.
wildness. The erotic element here is conveyed by a mysterious, sultry woman who is in reality a wife rather than a concubine. Russell, then, is playfully mixing metaphors here, perhaps as a western artist taking a jab at the “Eastern” art establishment. He is also saying, in a sense, that the faux exotic can be found as easily in the American West as in the fabled Orient. The fact that Russell transposed the American Indian and an Oriental subject is noteworthy. It reminds us how strong the lure of the exotic and primitive had become to a rapidly urbanizing and industrializing society. Interestingly, the Plains Indian motifs here are subliminally equated with the mobile peoples of the Asian steppes, possibly the fabled Mongols, in this pastiche on canvas.

At just the time Keeoma appeared, people were lining up to see “real” Indians in shows like Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. However, as the West became more tame, these Indians were not only more likely to be proudly considered “our” Natives, they were therefore also less likely to be Orientalized because they were now part of our mythic West. Thus, as Americans traveled into the West in the later nineteenth century, they were conflicted. They still expected to encounter endangered exotic peoples, but these same natives had now been brought under control. Rather than being dangerous, these primitive peoples
now offered a glimpse of what we ourselves had once been—and had perhaps lost—not very long ago. This represented imperial nostalgia—the process by which the very culture that transforms the lives of indigenous peoples soon longs to recapture those “lost” peoples. In the case of Russell’s painting, which appeared in several versions that quickly found their way into art collections and postcards, the sentiment is doubly ironic, for the lounging Keeoma belongs not only to another time but also to another place.

Canada also played a role in Orientalizing the peoples and landscapes of the American frontier during the nineteenth century. Here, as in the plains of the United States and even South America, it was easy to imagine the Indians as Asiatic tribes—a fantasy that persisted until those tribes were subdued. Whereas an American artist like Russell might playfully configure a Plains Indian woman into an odalisque—that is, offer a kinder and gentler domesticated female trope—Canadian geologist J. W. Dawson had something darker in mind in 1889 when he published the popular book *Modern Science in Bible Lands*. Prone to making sweeping generalizations about human physiognomy and Near Eastern history, Dawson described a race of people who had despotsitically dominated Egypt in ancient times. As part of his research, Dawson consulted a museum artifact called the Head of a Hyksos sphinx (fig. 1-8) to determine that these people were “not Semitic or Aryan, but Turanian.” By this Dawson meant a group of warlike people from the land of Tur, a huge, semiarid area that reaches northward from Persia (present-day Iran) into Asia. To Dawson, this artifact resembled “the face of some of the Northern tribes of Asia and Europe,” but he quickly added, “and to one familiar with the countenance of the natives of America, it recalls some of these.” In noting that the fierce Egyptian face was “altogether different from that of the native Egyptian kings of previous and succeeding dynasties,” Dawson observed that it reminded him not only of something closer to home on North American soil but of something equally as barbaric. Leaving little doubt that he had the Plains Indians in mind, Dawson mentioned several of their chiefs by name and also reproduced an illustration of Red Pheasant, “a Cree chief who took part in the Manitoba disturbances of 1885,” for direct comparison (fig. 1-9).

Dawson had good reason to mention those “disturbances,” which involved loose alliances of Cree Indians and Métis, some of whom had migrated across the border from Minnesota and Dakota Territory. These skirmishes and rumors of skirmishes in the Canadian plains were troubling indeed, for they promised to challenge Dawson’s own country’s control over that steppelike, rapidly developing, grain-producing region to the west of Lake Superior.
had wreaked havoc on Egyptian civilization, Dawson concluded that “no one could doubt” that both of these warlike types represented “the kind of people fitted to trample on the quiet, industrious Egyptians” and, by inference, hard-working Canadian farmers.72

After the turn of the century, when Indian troubles were a thing of the past, such comparisons quietly ended. Yet, as ranching and agriculture dominated much of the plains, it was still tempting to equate them with their Old World counterpart. Much like portions of the vast, semiarid region that stretches from North Africa north of the Sahara well into Asia Minor, they featured urban centers surrounded by vast swaths of open country covered with either natural grasses or swatches of Old World grains, such as wheat, barley, oats, and rye, whose origins can be traced to southwestern Asia. By the early twentieth century, it was considered characteristically American, but it also embodied the evolving agrarian landscape of the plains, a timeless Near Eastern tradition of pastoral ranches, small farms, and thriving urban centers. Even though Americans had created a seemingly distinctive landscape here, it too had roots in an area far to the east, namely the Arab world. As historical geographer John Miller Morris concludes, this landscape is still a reminder that “Fez, Morocco, and Lubbock, Texas, have their parallels.”73