

1-2013

## Book Review of *Go East, Young Man: Imagining the American West as the Orient* by Richard V. Francaviglia

Christina E. Dando

University of Nebraska at Omaha, [cdando@unomaha.edu](mailto:cdando@unomaha.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/geoggeolfacpub>

 Part of the [Geography Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dando, Christina E., "Book Review of *Go East, Young Man: Imagining the American West as the Orient* by Richard V. Francaviglia" (2013). *Geography and Geology Faculty Publications*. 28.  
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/geoggeolfacpub/28>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Geography and Geology at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Geography and Geology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

## Book Review

Christina E. Dando

University of Nebraska – Omaha, USA

Richard V. Francaviglia, *Go East, Young Man: Imagining the American West as the Orient*. Logan, Utah State University Press, 2011, x + 350 pages, US\$36.95 hardcover.

Historical geographer Richard Francaviglia tackles the intriguing imagery of the American west as orient in his latest book. Using vivid examples from the last two hundred years, Francaviglia illustrates the connections between the west and the middle and far east: distant lands associated in western culture with ancient history and sacred landscapes, but also with sensuality and hedonism. Francaviglia argues that 'Orientalism was a powerful force in shaping the way newcomers encountered, and made sense of, the people and places they found in the North American West' (p. 13).

Francaviglia approaches the topic regionally and temporally, addressing the regions and their depiction as east (or various easts) over their histories. He begins with the great plains (chapter one) and its depiction as garden (Eden) and as desert (Sahara). Through the construction of 'surrogate landscapes,' places are linked to an 'older, preconceived identity,' granting 'some of the character given the original,' creating a 'landscape that is on the one hand counterfeit; yet on the other is a tribute to the original' (pp. 13-14). Chapter two addresses the western interior and its association with Egyptian and middle eastern landscapes, imagery made complete when camels were imported. In the case of the Mormon cultural region (chapter three), Utah was linked to the holy land, sanctifying the 'new' landscape, underlining the Mormons' role as the new chosen people of God, and suggesting the fulfillment of biblical prophecy that the desert would bloom. Biblical analogies continue in chapter four where the American southwest as the holy land/middle east is explored. Chapter six, 'Syria on the Pacific,' examines California as middle east, building on its climate and later its produce (dates, citrus), but nurtured as California promoted itself as an Edenic oasis.

In chapters five and seven, the story becomes more complicated. Not only are the landscapes tied to surrogates but east was being woven into the landscape through immigration of Asian people. With the California gold rush, Chinese and Japanese immigrants actively participated in landscape creation. California, Oregon, and Washington were likened to Asian landscapes and spaces constructed embodying east in the west. The west-orient link, Francaviglia explains, 'can impart a venerable and noble Eastern quality to the nation, thus increasing national pride through appropriation' but also 'Orientalism can be employed to empower the United States to envision its horizons beyond its borders' (p. 220).

The book's last quarter addresses this 'beyond borders' view of the modern west (chapters eight and nine). The booming industries of Hollywood and Las Vegas have long played with these connections to the exotic, including built structures (casinos, theaters) and entertainment (television, movies, songs). Orientalism today provides, according to Francaviglia, 'an antidote to the constrictions imposed upon the West by its own drive toward the regimentation of an increasingly industrial (factory) and bureaucratic (office) life' (p. 251). The final chapter likens east to American west, from Japanese and Korean 'westerns' to the Mongolian landscape described as like Nevada. Francaviglia concludes by

reflecting on how examining our orientalizing of landscape might advance cultural understanding, particularly 'in future relationships between the United States and the real Orient' (p. 306-7).

Francaviglia's examples, discussions, and beautiful illustrations are excellent, with lovely phrasing and imagery. Despite this, by about mid-book pleasure fatigue sets in: the examples become overwhelming without a strong theoretical framework. Francaviglia discusses the work of post-colonial theorist Edward Said only superficially and then rejects it as negative (p. 8). Francaviglia appears to side with post-colonial theorists and historians, calling for a broader view acknowledging the negative and the positive in depictions of the east, but instead of focusing on a single theory to inform his analysis, he focuses on the 'process of creating new cultural identities' and suggests his own concept of 'surrogate landscape', but does not develop it fully (p. 13). Said's orientalism applies to some extent to the west; just as Europeans exoticized, eroticized, and 'othered' the east as it was conquered, we too did this to the north American west. David Wrobel ('Exceptionalism and globalism: travel writers and the nineteenth-century American West' *Historian* 68 (2006) 447) calls for a theoretical frame-work in approaching historical descriptions of the west that encompasses both benign exceptionalism and the imperial gaze. Francaviglia's book would have been far richer with such a stereoscopic view. Moreover, the chapters need introductions, signposts, and conclusions; examples should be reduced to hone the argument. Between the missing theoretical position and missing structure, the book feels untethered and lacks a clear goal. Compounding problems, the index is haphazard and there are factual errors in the conclusion (filmmaker Ang Lee identified as 'Wang Lee').

Francaviglia concludes that 'Orientalism is still a component in how the region is viewed today because we have not finished shaping that region through the creation of surrogate identities' (p. 288). Do we still need surrogate identities? When I think of contemporary popular culture in America – of kimchi tacos, of people of all ethnicities doing tai chi in public parks, of actresses or singers wearing saris or bindis – I think that perhaps the west-as-east is how we view this region. We have moved beyond surrogate identities to a postmodern, postcolonial hybrid landscape, a landscape that is no longer frontier but rather east/west, not an edge but a transition zone.

Further, what of the rest of the US landscape as east (briefly discussed on pp. 15-17)? Chinatowns are not limited to the west; what of New York's and Chicago's? Japanese cherry trees surround the tidal basin in Washington, DC, its annual cherry blossom festival creating another hybrid landscape, drawing Japanese and American tourists. Dynamic immigrant populations reshape the midwest, as in Detroit's large Arab-American community. The Americas have been east ever since Christopher Columbus made landfall in the Caribbean; perhaps what is 'new' is the attempt to override the oriental images with 'exceptional' American images of cowboys and settlers.

That said, Francaviglia is on to something. He has brought attention to an aspect of the US landscape hitherto unaddressed, covering it in meticulous detail with a sense of flair and fun too.