

The Orientalist Western

Susan Kollin
Department of English
Montana State University
Kollin@english.montana.edu

In *Out of Place*, Edward Said describes his experiences of displacement upon leaving Cairo to attend American boarding school in the 1950s. During his boyhood, the library rescued Said from what he called the “insufferable daily routine” of school, an escape that came in the form of classic American fiction, including the writings of Cooper and Twain. Said recalls these narratives “with considerable excitement, since they revealed a complete, parallel world to the Anglo-Egyptian one in which I had been immersed in Cairo.” Elsewhere, he recounts the books he devoured as a young boy in Egypt, stories of colonial adventure that chronicled the intrigues of European heroes played out across a variety of imperial landscapes. The connections between these two traditions, between the European colonial adventure tale and American “frontier” narrative as noted by a schoolboy looking for escapist reading, form the basis of this study of the orientalist Western. Rather than keeping these traditions separate and distinct, I examine the international origins of what would later become known as a uniquely American genre, “the Western,” and trace the ongoing global travels of this cultural form. Authors as diverse as Louis L’Amour, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Karl May, and Zane Grey set their adventure tales in the American West as well as the Middle East, Africa, and across the Ottoman empire, and in doing so, contributed to the development of a U.S. genre as well as a tradition of orientalism. This essay examines the overlapping and intersecting histories of the “Two Wests,” both the occidental West of the Orientalist binary as well as the American West as the ultimate extension of that logic. In the process, it traces the global travels of the colonial adventure narrative and its later transformation into the literary Western, examining along the way the ongoing production treatment of the native Other in relation to these “Western” selves.