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Geography 160

Response to Article, Feb 11, 2010

*Disorientation and Reorientation* by Patricia Limerick

Limerick approaches the American landscape from a perspective opposite to what prevails in literature and culture. The West has been the destination point for explorations originating the East, and the tone of historical accounts reflects this. As the mystique of the wide-open West derives from its size, *un-Eastern-ness*, and depiction as a frontier of possibility and second chances (Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*), Limerick turns traditional Westward "discovery" on its head by describing the process in reverse. She offers this new perspective in a seeming reaction against literature that was exclusively focused on the experience of Euro-colonizers. Limerick recognizes that the West has been experienced from all points of origin, by people who do not share the situational circumstances and motivations of The Colonizers. Arguing that scholarship about the West was entrenched in its own paradigm, Limerick focuses on perceptions and behaviors of more recent arrivals. As such, her geographically "backward" progression investigates the experiences of Asian invaders rather than White ones, liberating her from a traditional investigatory paradigm and allowing her to embark on research unclouded by colonialist terms like "discovery," and their misleading assumptions. Limerick's meta-cognitive approach attempts to convince the reader that she understands her Euro-invader personal background but refuses to be influenced by it, allowing her to read the landscape more objectively (as in the Tanforan example). In this investigation, physical boundaries represent a tradeoff between safety and danger, wealth and poverty, social acceptance and isolation. Although the reaction of Asians to the landscape is not well documented, Limerick makes her point using powerful excerpts from immigrant poetry. The examination is focused not only on newcomers' impressions of the landscape, but their influence on it. Limerick provides evidence from firsthand accounts of work and encampment life, including the emotional experience of encountering changing landscapes between the coastal and desert west, a subtle metaphor for immigrants' loss of orientation, comfort and meaning. The overall tone of the work is one that convinces the reader to understand landscape as a record of oppression, through the lens of those who suffered (now "ghosts").