ENGL 672.600: Topics in American Literature and Culture to 1900
Instructor: Ira Dworkin
TR 11:10A-12:25P
LAAH 535

Distribution Areas:
- One course in any literature, 1660-1900
- One course in English without Borders (transnational and/or diasporic literatures/cultures/theory; interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary study; cultural study of film, digital technologies, new media, popular culture)

“Islamic America”

This course examines the role of Islam as a cultural force in the literary development of the United States, from the British colonial era to the turn of the twentieth century. As Denise Spellberg documents in her research into Thomas Jefferson and the Qur’an, the subject of Islam was foundational to the political debates surrounding the establishment of the new nation. In the early national period, “Barbary” captivity tales, such as those by Royall Tyler and Susanna Rowson, were among the first popular novels and plays at a time when the United States was working to establish itself militarily and diplomatically in north Africa. Even earlier, dating back to the early eighteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth century, the African American tradition has important roots in Afro-Arabic narratives of Ayyub ibn Suleiman Diallo (Job ben Solomon) and others. Additionally, recent scholarship has documented the significant influence of Orientalism on many canonical nineteenth-century American writers such as Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, and Mark Twain.

The confluence of these literary encounters suggests an American cultural tradition that is not exclusively Christian, European, or Anglophone, which raises important questions about how Islam has contributed to shaping the literary, cultural, religious, racial, and military identity of the United States. Such questions continue to shape contemporary literature including Laila Lalami’s award-winning historical novel The Moor’s Account, which will begin the semester. As such, this course, for which no prior religious knowledge is expected, will be of particular interest to students interested in American literature and culture, transnational studies, ethnic studies, and African diaspora studies.


Students will be encouraged to pursue original research and to develop a final project related to their own academic interests. Students will be expected to deliver oral presentations and to facilitate seminar discussion.