

ENGL 672.600: Topics in American Literature and Culture to 1900
Instructor: Ira Dworkin
Spring 2019, Wed. 6-9

Distribution Areas:

- One course in any literature, 1800-the present
- One course organized around concepts, issues, or themes (as opposed to courses organized primarily according to chronological period)

“Islamic America”

In June 2009, newly elected U.S. President Barack Obama visited Egypt to deliver a major address on the relationship of the United States with Muslim people around the world. Before addressing pressing matters of foreign policy, he discussed the perceived opposition of the United States and Islam, making it clear that “Islam has always been a part of America's story,” providing a remarkable series of examples from the 1796 Treaty of Tripoli to boxer Muhammad Ali representing the nation by lighting the Olympic torch at the Atlanta games two centuries later.

This course examines this “part of America’s story,” and the role of Islam as a cultural force in the literary development of the United States, from the European 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), Omar ibn Said, 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. Secondary readings may include works by Sylviane Diouf, Ronald A. T. Judy, Ala Alryyes, Edward Said, and Khaled Beydoun.

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 historical novel *The Moor’s Account* (2014), which will begin the semester. As such, this course, for which no prior knowledge is expected, will be of interest to students interested in American literature and culture, transnational studies, race and ethnicity, and African diaspora studies.

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