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Pentamento Geographies: Nativity, Nation and the Construction of
Arab-ness in 19th Century American Travel Narratives

This presentation will focus on American literature of contact with the Arabo-Islamic world and the way in which these American citizens abroad used the structures of the Ottoman colonial empire to negotiate questions of American imperial identity. This literature of contact reveals Americans participating in a global rather than national cultural economy and exposes the unique nature of an American imperial milieu that was simultaneously colonial and post-colonial. In particular I will focus on the construction of Arab-ness in these travel narratives and the way in which this construction speaks to questions of nativity and national identity in the American context. In a critical moment in which the dominant model of America's relationship to the Arab world privileges the clash of civilizations or the incommensurability of Arab culture and American culture I think it is imperative to search for alternatives-- alternatives that are imbedded within 19th Century American imperial discourse and reveal the Orient not only as a site where imperial fantasies are played out and racial hierarchies are justified, but also as a place where counter-imperial narratives are realized, the contradictions in American national identity are brought to the fore and the opportunity exists for American racial hierarchies to be trans-valued and re-imagined. Writers discussed will include Herman Melville, John Lloyd Stephens, George Catlin, the Arab historian Abdul Rahman al-Jabarti and the African-American world traveler David Dorr.