Salim the Algerine (as he came to be known), son of an Ottoman official from Algiers, was captured by Spanish pirates in the western Mediterranean in the mid-eighteenth century, sold into slavery, and transported to Louisiana, from where he escaped and ultimately found shelter in English settler society in Williamsburg, Virginia. I am concerned with how a figure like Salim negotiated the crossing of a number of cultural borders, and how he fit into the reigning “global imaginaries” of the time. What did Salim represent for those who interacted with him? How did he recast his identity in a context of extreme dislocation? Salim’s adaptation to life in colonial Virginia was only a partial success. He acquired powerful patrons in the form of members of the Tidewater gentry and achieved recognition as a learned “gentleman,” but he remained a man apart, known for his eccentricities and even his questionable sanity. I explore the limits of his integration in light of his racial, religious, and cultural background based on the kinds of reflections and reactions his presence provoked, both at the time of his adventures and subsequently when his story achieved quasi-mythic standing in local culture.

I rely primarily on contemporary accounts of Salim preserved in memoirs and letters from the period, as well as a number of local tales and legends collected in Tidewater and Appalachian lore. As a historian of the Middle East, I place this material very much in the context of the Ottoman/Algerian educational, religious, and broader cultural practices of the time that shaped Salim.