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American Orientalism: A Study of Ethnic American Literature in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

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AMERICAN ORIENTALISM: A STUDY OF ETHNIC AMERICAN LITERATURE
IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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My dissertation is primarily conceived as an application of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism to the study of American ethnic writers' "writing back" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This historical period witnessed a dramatic change of American society and a rise of the US global power. It was also marked as a period of Orientalism with its exoticism, subjugation, and condescension. Set in this historical context, I argue that the American literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when American imperialism flourished, was repressive in terms of the denial of ethnic representations, namely, those of African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans; however, American realism in the 1880s, which embraced the explorations of new subject matters in the nation, also provided a kind of soil for ethnic writers to "write back" by challenging white cultural hegemony with literary works that represent their own ethnic identity and indigenous cultural heritage. My study expands the notion of "Orient" by distinguishing American Orientalism from the traditional European Orientalism. While the traditional European Orientalism is more geographically specific, the American Orientalism is basically culture-based, about a relationship between "the civilized" and "the savages." All the chapters of my dissertation, in different ways, aim to show to what extent the theory of Orientalism and the notion of cultural hegemony help us to understand the literary works produced by the Other at the turn of the century.