



SOKA UNIVERSITY OFFICE OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS PRESENTS

Disease and Disease Control in Eras of Globalization Conference

Friday | Sept 22 | 4:45 - 7:00 PM
Saturday | Sept 23 | 9 AM - 1 PM
Soka University of America Athenaeum

Ian Read: *Slavery, Climate, and Disease in Brazil*

Abstract

Between the 1600s and mid-1800s, Brazil was mostly recognized as a blessed Eden with a salubrious climate very different from other parts of the “torrid” or tropical zone. This reputation collapsed after 1850 when terrifying, unfamiliar or worsening epidemic diseases struck Brazil, including yellow fever, cholera, smallpox, and plague. This fall from grace and other uncertainties about one of the most ancestrally diverse countries in the world made a tight and intricate knot with ideas of race and progress that is hard for a historian to unravel. For example, more than any intrinsic, biological or phenotypical quality of individuals, Brazilian elite (and like their French and European counterparts) connected most diseases with the environment and climate even when apparent ethnic disparities existed. For example, many remarked how yellow fever mostly killed white European residents and visitors, while cholera took most of its victims among slaves and people of color, but few openly supported biological racism even as the white elite tacitly assumed and protected their supremacy. In sum, when Brazil entered into a six-decade destructive and destabilizing period of epidemic diseases in the middle of the 1800s, these new calamities of health cast doubt on an old and proud idea that Brazil’s mixed-race peoples were as capable and important for the country as any other group. They also undermined an old idea that slaves were integral for its economy and agrarian society.