



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

Sean Morey Smith: *"Their Constitutions are Much Stronger": Medical Expertise and Slavery Debates in the Eighteenth-Century Anglophone Atlantic*

Abstract

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europeans introduced African slave labor to the Americas, and every British colony on the Atlantic had at least some slaves by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Then, as slavery became increasingly codified, Britons began to contest it. First, Georgia's founders outlawed the institution in the colony shortly after its founding in 1733. Next, moral and political pressure against "man stealing" from religious groups like the Quakers in the second half of the century led to pro-imperial defenses of slavery and the slave trade. Additionally, newly independent northern states began banning slavery during the American Revolution. Physicians participated in all of these debates, and they used their medical expertise to argue for their respective political positions, either for or against slavery. By invoking medical knowledge, these physicians added an aspect of biological thinking to a debate largely focused on morality and political economy. In doing so, they helped support racial categories with natural "facts" that related race with specific climates and specific diseases. African-descended people became scientifically linked with hard labor in hot climates and a variety of illnesses caused by squalid living conditions. This paper explores the use of medical expertise in these debates over slavery and the legacy of using race as a category in medical diagnoses and research that has continued until today.