



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

### **Terri Snyder: "*Suicide, Slavery, and Epidemics: A Perspective from Early Modern British America*"**

#### Abstract

My paper for the conference will explore early modern perspectives on suicide epidemics among enslaved men and women in British America. European enslavers frequently expressed shock at the resolve and numbers of captive Africans who killed themselves; some of those involved in slaving reported that suicide by the enslaved was widespread, particularly in the British West Indies. The extent to which enslaved peoples' self-inflicted deaths can be understood as an epidemic in a modern numerical sense is indeterminable. However, their suicides did fit into early modern understandings of epidemics as diseases produced by newly prevalent conditions among a people at a particular time and location. The English slave trade to the Americas created unique circumstances that may indeed have precipitated an epidemic of suicide among the enslaved. African and native-born slaves endured kidnapping, multiple forced migrations and sales, family separations, distinctive labor regimes, and physical and sexual brutality; all of these conditions made suicide more imaginable and more acceptable among enslaved people. Researchers today study epidemics in relation to biological disease, the choices that lead to the spread of deadly disease, and the social consequences of pandemics. Early modern slave suicide, however, raises a different question about epidemics. When the context of the slave trade produces a conscious longing for death, is it possible to understand suicide among slaves as an epidemic of choice? My paper will conclude by considering this question in relationship to slave self-destruction in early modern British America.