

NECRO-ECONOMICS AND THE EARLY IBERIAN SLAVE TRADE

ANNA MORE, UNIVERSIDADE DE BRASÍLIA
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The early transatlantic slave trade was almost exclusively Iberian, with Portuguese controlling the points of origin in West Africa and Spanish controlling the destinations in the Americas. While much writing on the transatlantic slave trade focuses on its peak period in the eighteenth century, when the trade was predominantly English, this talk will argue that through a series of writings in the sixteenth century, Iberian authors first delineated the anomaly of chattel slavery. While enslavement was not controversial among European commentators, it was only justifiable as the result of war captivity. The market in African slaves forced commentators to confront the entirely new scenario of profit from a state of continual exposure to death.

This talk will trace the emergence in Iberian writings of what Warren Montag has called, adapting Achille Mbembe's phrase, necro-economics. Montag reads Adam Smith as the foundational text in necro-economics, but this paper will trace the rationalization of death in the context of the market to the earlier debates on the slave trade. It will focus particularly on the transition from narratives of exchange to the discussion of price and value in the late sixteenth-century Scholastic economists to argue that the transatlantic slave trade generated in practice and theory the acceptance of death as the inevitable by-product of surplus value.

Anna More is a Professor of Hispanic Literatures in the Department of Literary Theory and Literatures at the Universidade de Brasília, and was formerly Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at UCLA. She is the editor of *Sor Juan Inés de la Cruz: Selected Works*, a Norton Critical Edition (W.W. Norton, 2016) and author of *Baroque Sovereignty: Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora and the Creole Archive of Colonial Mexico* (U Penn Press, 2013), which won honorable mention for the best book in Humanities from the Mexico Section of the Latin American Studies Association. She has also published on seventeenth-century colonial science, poetics, and historiography in Mexico, among other topics.

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