

Neal Polhemus

Dissertation Abstract

Tentative Title of Dissertation:

“A Culture of Commodification: A Hemispheric and Intercolonial Migrations in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, 1660-1807”

Abstract:

My dissertation examines the structure, organization, and commercial operation of the transatlantic slave trade to the British Greater Caribbean and North America from 1660 to 1807. As the largest entrepôt for slaves arriving in the British New World, Jamaica was the cultural hearth for some 1.2 million enslaved West Africans. My research is guided by three important questions: (1) How did the British transatlantic slave trade adjust to fluctuating labor demands across the Caribbean and North America?; (2) How did slave trading merchants respond and adapt to changing political circumstances in West Africa that impacted the supply of slaves?; and (3) How was the marketplace structured in the British Caribbean and North America for the reception, landing, and dispersion of enslaved Africans?

My dissertation examines how interactions between West African elites and British imperial administrators shaped trading practices and the nature of cultural transactions to accommodate consumer demands in West Africa. The African side of the slave trade reveals that trade routes were operated by elite groups of African merchants engaged in discourses on modernity that directly impacted the evolution and form of the early modern marketplace. I argue that the market for enslaved Africans in British Atlantic destinations was structured in such a way that it reinforced middle passage traumas, creating additional hurdles for cultural retention amongst nascent slave communities. My dissertation makes an important methodological intervention towards understanding the multifaceted relationships between the Atlantic marketplace, the reception of slaves in the British Greater Caribbean, and African ethnicity and identity.