

Cosponsors: [Center for Race & Gender](#) and the [Center for Latin American Studies](#)

Monday, October 3, 2022

BRUNO RODRIGUEZ DE LIMA

Researcher, Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory

“Luiz Gama: Brazil’s Frederick Douglass”

The autobiography of the Black poet and lawyer Luiz Gama—the only Brazilian writer who lived long years enslaved—deserves special attention. Published in 1880, the “Autobiography of Luiz Gama” achieved a great editorial success and received several reprints in newspapers of the late 19th century. As in Douglass’ narrative, the heroic escape, the importance of literacy, the network of allies, and the triumph over adversities play a crucial role in Gama’s own autobiography.

Born free in the city of Salvador, son of a liberated African woman, Gama was sold by his father when he was ten years old. He lived enslaved until he was eighteen, when, in his words, he “secretly obtained conclusive proof” of his freedom. Following his escape from captivity, he served as a soldier before eventually becoming a public notary. After fifteen years in the police administration, he cleverly exploited a norm and applied for the right to practice law, despite lacking a law degree. He acquired this right and became one of the best-known lawyers in the country. My forthcoming book shows that Luiz Gama’s legal work helped approximately 500 enslaved people achieve freedom. Based on one thousand previously unknown sources, I present how this extraordinary and unprecedented feat was accomplished.

Comparing Douglass’ and Gama’s biographies is thus thought-provoking. Taking a close look at them can help one to understand how two leading historians—Professor Ariela Gross and Professor Alejandro de la Fuente—wisely stated that becoming Black could mean becoming free.

PLACE Philip Selznick Seminar Room, 2240 Piedmont Avenue
TIME 12:45 – 2:00pm.
INFO <https://www.csls.berkeley.edu>