

Call For Papers

2026 American Studies Association Conference

October 22-25, 2026

Improvising Black Queer & Trans Childhood: Power, Play, and Pleasure

The theme for the 2026 American Studies Association conference, “Improvisation,” invites us to consider the possibilities that emerge when thinking through the term as method, as a freedom-making practice, and as a doing for/towards the future. Many Black studies scholars have framed improvisation as an on-going practice of refusal and invention, particularly under conditions of extreme constraint. Those whose everyday lives are rendered precarious by state violence turn to creative, imaginative, and playful forms of resistance as a way of challenging oppressive systems of power.

We seek to engage the question of improvisation through the site of Black queer and trans childhood, for it is the lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as young, Black, and queer that offers new forms of knowledge. The Black queer/ trans child gestures to an elsewhere, a horizon that we have not yet seen, but one that might be created by acknowledging what has made our world uninhabitable in our present moment.

We welcome abstracts that explore the lived experiences and representations of Black queer/trans children/childhood across all time periods and locations. We are interested in how Black queer/trans children leverage diverse forms of improvisation in order to develop tools for survival and the creation of a new grammar for American childhood. Ideal papers will provide an interdisciplinary approach by engaging in fields of inquiry such as but not limited to: critical race, Black childhood, feminist, queer/trans, and disability studies.

Abstracts of no more than 300 words should be sent to Dr. Jennifer James and Kevin Blanks with the subject line **Improvising Childhood** and a concise bio (100-150 words) as a Word document or PDF **no later than February 20, 2026**. Submissions and questions should be sent to jcj@gwu.edu and kblanks@gwu.edu.

Some suggested topics for papers include, but of course not limited to:

- Representations of childhood/children in literature, film, social media, print culture, television, comics, material culture, music, games, etc.
- Performance of Childhood
- Depictions of queer children’s play across time/place
- Agency & Power
- Rupture of the Human, children and monstrosity
- Queer/Trans adultification
- The Constituting alternative identities
- Figure of the Emblematic Child
- Desire & Pleasure
- Futurity & Otherwise
- World-making
- Coming of Age/ Growing up
- Space & Time
- Disability/Debility
- Relationship between Environment & constructions of Black queer childhood