Call for Proposals

**for the 2026 ANNUAL MEETING of the
AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION**

IMPROVISATION

**OCTOBER 22–25 in CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
SUBMISSIONS DUE MARCH 1, 2026**

THE ANNUAL MEETING

THIS YEAR

Chicago, Illinois
"Improvisation"

October 22–25, 2026 at the Historic Palmer House Hotel

The Annual Meeting is a vibrant gathering where scholars, educators, students, activists, and artists come together to explore U.S. culture and history through an interdisciplinary lens.

More than just a conference, it's a dynamic space where disciplinary boundaries dissolve, geographies blur, and professional divides disappear. Here, we connect, collaborate, and exchange ideas in a variety of formats and across a wide array of fields.

Beyond fostering dialogue, the annual meeting serves as a platform to celebrate achievements and elevate the field of American Studies, and in so doing engages practitioners alongside the wider public in meaningful, lasting ways.

2026 THEME
& PROGRAM COMMITTEE

"I am interested in shock, and surprise, and improvisation, as methods by which to understand political and social life."
– Billy-Ray Belcourt

Improvisation is not an accident of collapse.
It is a method of creating under constraint.
The riff. The break. The pivot. The "yes and."

Improvisation is more than an act of survival.
It is mutual aid conjured in dissent.
Glitter thrown on ICE agents.
Frankie Knuckles spinning vinyl at The Warehouse.
It is sweat-drenched bodies. Intricate footwork.
La Raza. Ebony. Jet. Underground zines. Mixtapes igniting new freedom dreams.

Improvisation lives in the ruins of what has been broken and still dares to imagine what might be built next. In its most radical form, it is essential to reparative justice and worldbuilding. Both instant and enduring: improvisation is a fleeting gesture that can open the door to permanent transformations. Those who improvise know that violence is ongoing, that collapse is real. Yet they dare to believe that creativity, play, and collaboration are lifelines.

A change is gonna come. But what do we do in the meantime? This conference implores us to dwell in the meantime.

2026 marks 250 years since the founding of the United States—a nation built upon the entangled systems of settler colonialism and chattel slavery. This turbulent anniversary calls for new provocations: What is the work of American Studies in our current meantime? If we take improvisation seriously—as method, politics, and horizon—what new forms of freedom must be improvised now?

Higher education is under attack. Departments dismantled. Funding slashed. Tenure eroded. Students and contingent faculty persecuted, fired, deported, or disappeared. Academic freedom, as we once understood it, is no longer. We ask: What is a "comfort zone" in a time of global peril? Are our scholarly tools still useful, or must we do wholly different work? What unlikely alliances might be required to survive this crisis? These questions demand an honest reckoning as we imagine a future—an "other side." We must get messy. It is in the messiness of collaboration, in the décalage of translation, that imperfect possibilities arise.

Chicago, our gathering place, is improvisation in action. A city built on the ancestral homelands of the Neshnabék: the Potawatomi, Odawa, and Ojibwe Nations; the Illinois Confederation: the Peoria and Kaskaskia Nations; and the Myaamia, Wea, Ho-Chunk, Sauk, and Meskwaki Nations, shaped by centuries of dispossession and violated treaties. A palimpsest continually remapped by waves of Black, Latino/a/x, and Asian migration. It is a global city: Bridgeview. Bronzeville. Humboldt Park. Pilsen. Chinatown. Albany Park. A cultural hub whose poetics hum in Gwendolyn Brooks' "Boy Breaking Glass." The pensive lenses of Carlos Javier Ortiz and Diana Solís. The whimsy of a Shirien Damra illustration. The genius of immigrant artist-educators who birthed Chicago-style improv comedy. The experimental practices of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. From jazz to house, drill to reggaeton. From Fred Hampton and the Young Lords through the Rainbow Coalition to the Arab American Action Network. Chicago is a living repertoire of improvisatory practices that link art, activism, and knowledge production. A city scarred by segregation and violence, yet alive with queer and trans brilliance and disability justice work. Wreckage and glitter, wound and possibility. The city deeply informs—and maybe even changes—how we gather and what we can learn from one another and from our local communities.

This call for proposals is a blue note; riff on it freely. We want to reimagine what an academic conference can be: immersive, collaborative, and deeply engaged with the community. We invite scholars, artists, activists, archivists, and community builders to dream big with us. While we welcome paper presentations and roundtables, we want to experiment with alternative session formats: performance art, workshops, laboratories, immersive screenings, tours, and more. We especially welcome proposals that center the Midwest in conversations about the global South or American Studies from the periphery. We also seek professional development and community organizing panels that use improvisation as an approach.

Committee Chair

Tanisha C. Ford,
CUNY Graduate Center

Committee Co-Chairs

Marlon Bailey,
Washington University in St. Louis

Terrion Williamson,
University of Illinois–Chicago

Committee Members

Tiffany Barber, UCLA
Adrienne Brown, University of Chicago
Rikki Byrd, University of Texas–Austin
Sonya Donaldson, Colby College
Charles Hughes, Rhodes College
Kasey Keeler, University of Wisconsin–Madison
S. Heijin Lee, University of Hawaii at Manoa
Matthew Morrison, Stanford University
Akemi Nishida, University of Illinois–Chicago
J.T. Roane, Rutgers University–New Brunswick
Mérida Rúa, Northwestern University
John Thabiti Willis, Grinnell College

Take note of the NEW

PROPOSAL FORMATS

for 2026

Find panelists, chairs, and commentators for your session!

COLLABORATION HUB

Paper Sessions

Traditional sessions for presentation and discussion of 3-4 individual research papers, with a chair and commentator. Presenters share papers with chair, commentator, and other panelists prior to conference. Must include 3-4 papers with a designated chair and commentator. In addition to your session abstract, each paper must also have an abstract. Most paper sessions will be scheduled for rooms without video equipment. Sessions proposing fewer than three papers are unlikely to be accepted.

Individual Papers

Presenters submit their own individual papers, and accepted papers are then compiled into sessions built by the Program Committee. A limited number of individual papers will be accepted to the program, which not only need to pass the test of excellence but also must fit with other individual papers to form a coherent session.

Individual paper submissions must designate two topical categories for their papers at time of submission. In order to facilitate the Program Committee's work of constructing sessions from accepted individual paper submissions, individual papers submitted without a category or submitted to a category that does not align with the paper's topic will be disqualified from consideration.

Book Sessions

A unified category for sessions focusing on one or more books, including book roundtables, Author Meets Readers, and Author Meets Critics sessions.

Book sessions generally have 5 or more participants and include one or more featured titles per session as well as respondents and/or discussants. Books sessions usually focus on recent publications.

Film Sessions

Screenings of films or media works followed by discussion. May include filmmakers and/or scholars as discussants.

Retrospective Sessions

Sessions honoring a major scholar, publication, milestone, body of work that has influenced the field, or significant event on its anniversary. Format may vary; specify format (i.e. paper session, roundtable, etc.) in your proposal.

Roundtable Discussions

Conversation-based sessions focused on dialogue rather than formal presentation. Larger numbers of participants are welcome. No presentations, papers, slides, or PPTs are allowed and no video equipment is provided. Room setup may be in a round or half-round. Opening remarks limited to 15 minutes total. Chair facilitates discussion.

Performance Sessions

Live performances such as music, dance, spoken word, drag, improv, or other creative expressions.

Specify content, duration, and setup needs in your proposal abstract. May be scheduled in a Performance Room, ballroom, or off-site venue. Video equipment may be provided.

Professional Development

Participatory workshops focused on mentoring, skill-sharing, or professional networking for the audience. Session formats may include mentoring, collaboration, or peer exchange. Sessions should thoughtfully consider the impact for those attending, and descriptions must specify 2–3 concrete outcomes for participants.

Any members can propose professional development sessions, but ASA caucuses and committees are particularly encouraged to sponsor them. In addition to two scholarly sessions, caucuses and committees may sponsor up to two professional development sessions. Participation in a professional development session is distinct from scholarly sessions and does not count toward a member's scholarly session limits.

Lightning Talks

Structured, rapid-fire sessions of brief presentations (5–7 minutes each). Each presenter responds to a shared theme or prompt, with the discussion moderated by strict timekeeping.

Debate & Dialogue

Structured discussions in which two or more participants articulate different positions on a shared question, followed by audience dialogue.

Off-Site Sessions

Events located outside the main conference venue (e.g., community centers, museums, cultural sites).

Provide full logistical details, if known: day and time, location, community partner(s) if applicable, accessibility, and capacity.

Take note of the NEW

PROPOSAL FORMATS

for 2026

Submit your proposal between February 2 - March 1, 2026.

SUBMIT HERE

SUBMISSION MATERIALS

Tips for Preparing a Successful Proposal

- Diversify your panel with scholars from different disciplinary and methodological backgrounds, institutions, and rank to increase your chance of acceptance.

- Be cogent. Each session proposal should have a panel abstract that clearly articulates the stakes of the research, the themes across the individual papers, and the relevance of the work to the conference theme. Session and paper titles should be clear and easily comprehensible.

- Participate as part of a complete session. Individual paper submissions are less likely to be accepted than session proposals. Use the ASA's Panel Collaboration Hub to coordinate with other members on a session.

- Start early and submit on time. The ASA does not accept late or incomplete submissions. If you are constructing a session, you must coordinate with several people to collect abstracts and draft a rationale that is rigorous and aligns with the meeting's theme.

For all sessions, you are required to submit the following as you would wish it to appear in the program:

- Session title (maximum of 15 words)
- Session abstract (maximum of 1200 characters)
- Session keywords (2 required)
- A 500 character (or less) biographical statement for each participant
- Chair name, title, and institution

For paper sessions:

- Individual paper or presentation titles from each session participant (maximum of 15 words per title)
- 1200 character (or less) paper abstracts from each session participant
- Session keywords (2 required)

For professional development sessions:

- A clear statement of how the session will contribute to the professional development of the session audience, including 2-3 concrete outcomes for audience members

For book sessions:

- Title, author, publisher, publication date, and publishers' URL for all books to be discussed in the session

For off-site sessions:

- Format (roundtable, paper, performance, etc.)
- If known, day/time, location/site, community partner(s), accessibility, capacity
- Indicate if you need help finding a site or community partner(s)

Participation Limits and Exceptions

- Members may appear in no more than two scholarly session proposals (e.g. paper, book, performance sessions, etc.): **once as a presenter** and **once as the session chair or commentator** for a **separate** session. **Your proposals will be eliminated from consideration if you exceed these limits.** Failure to comply with this rule may adversely impact other members listed on each proposal
- Members may present in **one or more professional development sessions**; participation in these sessions does not count towards scholarly session limits.
- Members may also appear on presidential sessions. At the discretion of the Program Committee, participants may also appear on sessions organized outside of the regular timeline of programming to address emergent issues or conditions or in relation to site-specific events. Participation in these kinds of sessions is considered exempt from the usual appearance rules.
- **A caucus or committee** may officially sponsor two scholarly sessions along with up to two professional development sessions.

Participation Rules & Requirements

- **Each person on your proposal, regardless of capacity, must have an ASA membership** before the proposal can be created and submitted. Obtain from each person the email associated with their active membership to ensure they are properly selected and notified.
- **Participants must abide by the Participation Limits as specified earlier.** Your proposals will be eliminated from consideration if your name appears on more than one scholarly proposal as presenter.
- **Participants must be willing to be scheduled at any time during the conference** and cannot request specific dates and times for reasons unrelated to medical, religious, and disability accommodations.
- **All sessions for the annual meeting are in-person.** Only participants with specific conditions that preclude travel (i.e. medical condition, disability, incarceration, or legal restrictions) may request to present virtually.
- **Presenters must register for the conference if accepted.** Registration is non-refundable; rates are available on our website. Some need-based travel grants will be available and include registration fee reimbursement.
- **All persons listed on proposals submitted are bound by the Conference Submission & Participation Rules** as outlined on our website.
- **All those accepted to present at the annual meeting are expected to complete and submit a Participation Agreement** in accordance with posted deadlines. A link to this agreement will be sent with all proposal acceptances. Failure to return your Participation Agreement by the deadline will result in your removal from the program.

A/V Policies at the 2026 Annual Meeting

- **Video projectors are limited** and will only be available for a select number of panels centered on visual material. When submitting proposals, participants should assume that there will be no video capacity available. If your proposal is accepted, you will be informed whether your session has been accepted as video-enabled or no-video. ASA staff will make all determinations about video-enabled rooms. Please understand that no changes are possible either prior to or during the conference.
- **Laptops are not provided.** Panelists should plan to bring their own laptops and a variety of adapters as needed to connect with speakers (and projectors if in a video-enabled room). If multiple panelists in a session will need to use a projector, it is recommended that you coordinate and put all visual material on one laptop or thumb drive for smooth transitions.
- **Virtual accommodations:** Only panelists with specific conditions that preclude travel (i.e. medical condition, disability, incarceration, or legal restrictions) may request to present virtually. All requests must be received by May 1. No screening of pre-recorded papers or remarks is permitted.
- **We encourage paper handouts and sharing PowerPoint decks with session audiences via their phones.** More details about easy ways to do this will be forthcoming later in the year.

RULES & POLICIES

Special Information for Caucuses & Committees

Each caucus and committee may submit two scholarly sessions and two professional development workshops for consideration.

KEY DATES & STEPS

SUBMISSIONS OPEN	February 2
MEMBERSHIP WAIVER REQUESTS DUE	February 22
SUBMISSIONS DUE BY 11:59 PM PT	March 1
PROPOSAL DECISIONS SENT	April 22
ACCOMMODATION REQUESTS DUE	May 1
TRAVEL GRANT APPLICATIONS* DUE	May 8
TRAVEL GRANT DECISIONS SENT	May 15
PARTICIPATION AGREEMENTS DUE	May 20
CONFERENCE REGISTRATION OPENS	May 20
HOTEL REGISTRATION OPENS	May 20
SCHEDULE AVAILABLE TO PRESENTERS	July 31
PARTICIPANT REGISTRATION DUE	September 1

*Travel grants are available for contingent faculty, community members, and graduate students to offset the cost of attending the annual meeting. See the link below under Step 3 to apply.

Questions?
asastaff@theasa.net

Submission Steps

1

Join or Renew Membership Before Submitting Proposal

MANAGE MEMBERSHIP

2

Submit Proposal by March 1st

SUBMISSION SITE

3

Submit Requests & Applications

ACCOMMODATION REQUESTS

TRAVEL GRANT APPLICATIONS