

CFP: “Mutual Aid in Early America”
Society of Early Americanists conference, June 2023.

Co-organizers: Ittai Orr (University of Michigan); Liz Polcha (Drexel University); Kimberly Takahata (Villanova University)

In response to the overlapping crises of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recession, the resurgence of fascism, and state and institutional failures, contemporary activists have turned to mutual aid as an avenue for building community resilience and resistance to oppressive regimes. As author and activist Dean Spade writes, “in [the] context of social isolation and forced dependency on hostile systems, mutual aid—where we choose to help each other out, share things, and put time and resources into caring for the most vulnerable—is a radical act.” Radical, that is, because the stability of unjust systems relies on the disempowering individuation of the oppressed. As Spade notes, this is why FBI director J. Edgar Hoover identified the Black Panther Party’s (BPP) Free Breakfast for Children program as “potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for.” Mutual aid raises the specter of a many-headed hydra that has preoccupied the beneficiaries of unequal power relations for centuries.

This panel will explore the precedents of modern forms of mutual aid. It will ask questions like: what is the longer cultural and social history of mutual aid in the Americas and Atlantic World? To what extent can we find the roots of contemporary mutual aid practices in Early American strategies of survival and resistance to colonialism and slavery? How did mutual aid contribute to the rise of revolutionary movements and anticolonial cultural practices in the Atlantic world? What writing systems can be recovered that signify legacies of mutual aid, following Nicole Aljoe’s concept of the embedded slave narrative and Margaret Bruchac’s restorative research? Literary scholarship has long acknowledged the individuating power of settler colonial cultural production—especially in the novel form— but what cultural practices and traditions countered the individualism of dominant literary modes? We welcome papers on scholarship informed by community practices of mutual aid, including digital humanities projects, archival and editorial practices, pedagogy, and experimental forms of sharing resources.

Papers might explore how exclusionary categories like race, gender, and disability rendered some people particularly dependent on acts of mutual aid; they might engage Indigenous perspectives, epistemologies, and histories; Black Atlantic poetics and performance; histories of medicine and science; digital scholarship; visual and material culture studies; and environmental studies. **We especially encourage graduate students, early career scholars, contingent researchers, and library and museum workers to submit, with an opportunity to publish reflections on the panel in [Insurrect! Radical Thinking in Early American Studies](#), an online publication that pays its authors and editors.**

Please send abstracts of approximately 300 words to Ittai Orr at ittaiorr@umich.edu, Liz Polcha at liz.polcha@drexel.edu, and Kimberly Takahata at kimberly.takahata@villanova.edu by October 20th. **We welcome proposals from individuals who are not yet certain of their**

ability to participate in-person in June 2023 and will include a hybrid online option if necessary.