

**Call for Papers: “Milestones in Black Studies” Panel Stream**  
**2023 Society of Early Americanists Biennial Conference (University of Maryland)**

Co-Organizers: Cassander Smith (University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa)  
Alex Mazzaferro (University of California, Los Angeles)  
John Saillant (Western Michigan University)

The Program Committee for the upcoming Society of Early Americanists biennial conference—to be held June 8-11, 2023, at the University of Maryland and in the greater Washington, D.C. area, with a possible hybrid option to be determined—invites proposals for a panel stream commemorating three groundbreaking works in Black Studies.

The 30th publication anniversary of Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* in 2022 and the 30th and 40th anniversaries, respectively, of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* and Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* in 2023 provide an occasion to reflect on these works’ rich intellectual legacies within early American and African American literary and historical study, as well as the new scholarship they might inspire in the future.

The “Milestones in Black Studies” panel stream will consist of three formal panels—each devoted to one of the aforementioned books—plus a culminating roundtable that will discuss Gilroy, Robinson, and Morrison’s works together, with a dual emphasis on issues of research and pedagogy. Scholars working in any area of early Black Atlantic history, literature, and culture are encouraged to submit.

Included below are individual CFPs for the Robinson, Morrison, and Gilroy panels, plus guidelines for roundtable participant proposals. Submissions for all four of these opportunities will follow the same procedure: a 250-word abstract and a 2-page CV should be emailed to the panel’s lead organizer by **October 24, 2022**. We ask that you limit your submission to just one panel or roundtable proposal.

The panels and roundtable will operate as a suite, with the goal of consistent attendance across the four sessions.

## Call For Papers: “*Playing in the Dark* at Thirty” Panel

Part of the “Milestones in Black Studies” Panel Stream

Society of Early Americanists Biennial Conference (June 8-11, 2023; University of Maryland)

Lead Organizer: Cassander Smith (University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa)

In 1992, Toni Morrison published her landmark study *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Almost immediately, the book set the terms of engagement for how scholars study race in the formation of American literature. In a 2016 *Time Magazine* article, the book was deemed one of the most frequently assigned texts in American university classrooms. *Playing in the Dark* has been so influential because it provides a framework for addressing the central importance of race in shaping the creative, or literary, imagination of white American writers. Almost every scholar of race in America has read or heard of *Playing in the Dark*. This panel marks the thirtieth anniversary of the book’s publication and is part of the “Milestones in Black Studies” panel stream for SEA 2023. The panel seeks proposals from scholars interested in assessing the impact of Morrison’s book on the study of race and early American literature and contemplating new ways of reading and applying a beloved classic.

Papers might probe the book’s key terms, *white literary imagination*, *Africanism*, and *Africanist presence*, or engage with its central claim that Black figures appear in American literature as metaphors that mediate social, political, cultural, and economic structures. Papers could consider how an Africanist presence manifests specifically in the literatures of the early Americas or interrogate the book’s formulation of white American authorship as proprietary and creative. What would it mean to consider Black presences in American literature as not just the product of a white author’s imaginative prerogatives but also product of multicultural interactions in the material world beyond the text?

Approaches might emphasize the limitations of *Playing in the Dark* as a study that only addresses fiction published in the United States and largely in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Also, the book does not engage outrightly with (early) African American literature. How might the broader scope of early American literary studies stretch Morrison’s theories? What might *Playing in the Dark* mean in early Atlantic Hispanophone or Francophone narratives or in the many nonfictional texts that constitute early American literature, such as Puritan sermons, travel narratives, ship logs, captivity narratives, letters and diaries, runaway slave ads, natural and medical treatises, and commercial pamphlets? In terms of early African American literature, what can *Playing in the Dark* tell us about how race might have shaped the texts of early American Black writers? That is to say, how might *Playing in the Dark* illuminate the defining features of a *Black* literary imagination? How is African American literature indebted to an Africanist presence? The panel welcomes especially pedagogical perspectives on *Playing in the Dark*. Proposals might reflect on experiences teaching the text in undergraduate and/or graduate courses. How do students experience the text’s central claims? How well does the text pair with early American primary readings?

Proposal submissions, comprised of a 250-word abstract and a 2-page CV, should be emailed to Cassander Smith, Associate Professor of English at the University of Alabama (clsmith17@ua.edu) by **October 24, 2022**.

**Call For Papers: “*Black Marxism* at Forty” Panel**  
Part of the “Milestones in Black Studies” Panel Stream  
Society of Early Americanists Biennial Conference (June 8-11, 2023; University of Maryland)

Lead Organizer: Alex Mazzaferro (University of California, Los Angeles)

This panel commemorates the fortieth publication anniversary of Cedric Robinson’s landmark 1983 study *Black Marxism* as part of the “Milestones in Black Studies” panel stream at SEA 2023. While Robinson’s book initially met with a surprisingly muted response, it has enjoyed resurgent interest in recent years as new generations of scholars have rediscovered its profound insight into slavery’s history and aftermath. From reconsiderations of the relationship between capitalism and slavery to renewed inquiries into the actual, potential, or failed links between Leftist politics and racial justice movements preceding and including Black Lives Matter, scholars are finding in Robinson’s deft synthesis a source of inspiration and provocation as they continue to investigate Africa’s cataclysmic collision with the capitalist world system.

Prospective panelists are invited to reflect on *Black Marxism*’s legacy using a case study from their own work that engages with it. Papers might take up one or both of the book’s signature concepts—“racial capitalism” and “the Black radical tradition”—in the specific temporal and geographic contexts of early America. Work in the former vein might revisit the foundational importance of racism to bourgeois hegemony by considering an early moment in the history of its consolidation. Papers taking the latter tack might explore how Black radical thinkers *before* Robinson’s twentieth-century triumvirate of W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, and Richard Wright transcended Marxism’s myopic Eurocentrism. How can early American archives of resistance, rebellion, maroonage, and emancipation flesh out Robinson’s claim that it was enslaved people and agrarian peasants, rather than the European industrial proletariat privileged by Marx and his Western heirs, that would form the locus of revolutionary agency in modernity? Conversely, panelists might seek to rectify some of Robinson’s own blind spots: his failure to fully integrate Native Americans into his accounts of both racial capitalism and nonwestern radicalism, for instance, or *Black Marxism*’s fairly brief treatment of religion compared with his *Black Movements in America* (1997).

Finally, panelists might reflect on the crucial questions of method raised by *Black Marxism*’s sprawling chronology, expansive geography, and staggering theoretical ambition. What are the analytical affordances of thinking synthetically across the multi-century sweep of Africa’s encounter with capitalism, imperialism, and slavery, instead of in the more granular terms encouraged by disciplinary divides? How does Robinson’s interweaving of far-flung locales resonate with the recent turn toward a more capacious notion of “Vast Early America”? And what strategies might allow us to follow *Black Marxism* in plotting continuities of consciousness, cosmology, ethos, epistemology, and culture across a diaspora otherwise marked—as scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Marisa Fuentes have argued—by silence, loss, and disconnection?

Proposal submissions, comprised of a 250-word abstract and a 2-page CV, should be emailed to Alex Mazzaferro, Assistant Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles (mazzaferro@ucla.edu) by **October 24, 2022**.

## Call for Papers: “*The Black Atlantic at Thirty*” Panel

Part of the “Milestones in Black Studies” Panel Stream

Society of Early Americanists Biennial Conference (June 8-11, 2023; University of Maryland)

Lead Organizer: John Saillant (Western Michigan University)

2023 marks the thirtieth publication anniversary of one of the most influential books in the fields of African American, African Atlantic, and Afro-British literary and historical studies. Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* opened up for many scholars and students a focus on the admixture of black responses and black resistance to the Atlantic world and its vast system of slavery and racism. This evocative work confirmed that slavery and race were elemental in the formation of modernity as it resonated with the work of other scholars on hybridity, *mestizaje*, *métissage*, syncretism, and transatlantic and transnational systems that went beyond national frameworks. It introduced terminology, such as “anti-anti-essentialism,” and it called our attention to flow and crossings in literature and culture. It made the experience of double-consciousness seem even more important than it had been since its first articulation by W. E. B. Du Bois. Since its publication, scholars have deepened our understanding of subjects developed in Gilroy’s book and have followed his lead—yet also worked against him—into entirely new topics.

We call on scholars in all stages of the profession with interest and expertise in subjects covered by or sparked by *The Black Atlantic* to submit proposals for papers to be presented as part of the “Milestones in Black Studies” panel stream. Papers in *The Black Atlantic* panel could engage the relevance of Gilroy’s work to the periods, regions, texts, and themes studied by members of SEA while showcasing innovative scholarship and recent directions in the work of early Americanists. Papers could further the criticisms of *The Black Atlantic* that have come from a variety of directions, including, for example, by those with a focus on the Indian Ocean and those with a firmer insistence on African origins. Papers could address the extension of the form of Gilroy’s analysis into a multiplicity of Atlantics, for instance, an Indigenous Atlantic.

A common concern among SEA members might be adding a deeper field of early material (e.g., 1492–1830) to the paradigm of *The Black Atlantic*, which draws its sources from an Anglo-American circuit of the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Papers could, however, question the relevance of Gilroy’s analysis to earlier periods. This panel is open to those who would corroborate *The Black Atlantic*, those who would criticize it, and those who wish to argue that different archival materials lead us to reconceptualize the terms of the book.

The possibilities above are meant only to be suggestive and abstract. We follow Gilroy’s self-reflection in the preface to *The Black Atlantic*: “It is essential to emphasise that there is nothing definitive here. Black Atlantic culture is so massive and its history so little known that I have done scarcely more than put down some preliminary markers for more detailed future investigations.” Our goal is a panel that considers the last thirty years along with the next ten years in ways defined by the presenters.

Proposal submissions, comprised of a 250-word abstract and a 2-page CV, should be emailed to John Saillant, Professor of English and History at Western Michigan University (john.saillant@wmich.edu) by **October 24, 2022**.

## Call for Participants: “Milestones in Black Studies” Roundtable

Part of the “Milestones in Black Studies” Panel Stream

Society of Early Americanists Biennial Conference (June 8-11, 2023; University of Maryland)

Co-Organizers: Cassander Smith (University of Alabama)

Alex Mazzaferro (University of California, Los Angeles)

John Saillant (Western Michigan University)

The culminating roundtable for the “Milestones in Black Studies” panel stream will ask participants to think about all three of the scholarly works individually commemorated in the preceding panels: Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* (1983), Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1992), and Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Attending to the challenges and opportunities these important studies present for both research and teaching, the roundtable will take stock of their impact on early American and African American studies and speculate about their scholarly afterlives.

Proposals should outline how the participant will address the three broad questions animating the roundtable:

- 1.) In what ways do Robinson, Morrison, and Gilroy’s works speak to one another?
- 2.) What are your strategies for teaching one or more of these studies?
- 3.) What can these studies’ disparate reception histories teach us about the uneven uptake of scholarly work, the importance of timing, and the politics of citation?

Roundtable participants will have 7-10 minutes to deliver prepared remarks before opening onto a broader conversation and Q+A. While illustrative examples are welcome, emphasis should be laid on synthetic discussion of all three studies as they illuminate the state of the field in early American and African American studies.

Proposal submissions, comprised of a 250-word abstract and a 2-page CV, should be emailed to Alex Mazzaferro, Assistant Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles ([mazzaferro@ucla.edu](mailto:mazzaferro@ucla.edu)) by **October 24, 2022**.