



## **Work: A Conference on the Labors of Language, Culture, and History**

Swiss Association for North American Studies Biennial Conference

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of St. Gallen

November 27-28, 2020

[sanas20.com](http://sanas20.com)

### *Keynotes (tentative titles)*

Michael Denning (Yale): “Laboring Life: Re-founding the Critical Theory of Work”

Michele Elam (Stanford): “Representing the Future of Work: Art-work in the Age of AI”

Katja Kanzler (Leipzig): “Affective Labor in 21st-Century Popular Culture”

When the speaker in Philip Levine’s poem “What Work Is” says that everyone old enough to read a poem knows about work, he means that work is a universal condition. Some people work more often than others, or under more desirable circumstances, or for better pay, but we all do it. You’re probably working right now. If you’re reading a call for papers, you know what work is.

Yet like all fundamental categories, work becomes ever more complex as we examine it more closely. As Raymond Williams and Andrea Komlosy have shown, the terms “work,” “labor,” “job,” “employment,” “occupation,” “profession,” “vocation,” “task,” “effort,” “pursuit,” and “calling” form a dense web of overlapping and contrasting meanings. Language must labor to grasp the connections between cooking a Big Mac and writing a novel, lifting a box in a warehouse and making beds at a hotel, professing and caring for children, hammering and tweeting. But if art is also a kind of work, why is the work of art so rarely directed toward its own conditions of production? While North American literature, television, film, theater, and music have helped to make work intelligible or, conversely, communicated its resistance to meaning, they have also been relatively uninterested in it. Moreover, as Kathi Weeks observes, “work produces not just economic goods and services but also social and political subjects.” Thus, the analysis of work must also contend with how histories of class struggle, gendered and sexual divisions of labor, racial hierarchies, and citizenship regimes have determined who counts as a worker and qualifies for the rights, protections, and social respect thereof. And yet waged work is only the tip of an enormous iceberg that feminist theorists call “socially reproductive labor”—the gendered, mostly unpaid, and hidden work of caring for, feeding, nursing, and teaching the next

generation of workers. Ultimately, the more we meditate on the breadth and depth of work, the less we know what work is or does.

This conference proposes that the question of work does a great deal of work for the study of North America. The conference is inspired not only by the richness of work as a linguistic, cultural, and historical concept, but also by current conjunctures that are profoundly changing work and its worlds. The bread-winning patriarch has given way to dual-earning households, steady jobs to contingency and “gigs.” Beneath the surface of official unemployment statistics lie decades of stagnant wages, “bullshit jobs,” stress, and alienation. Once a symbol of freedom and opportunity, work has become a symptom of national and international crisis in debates over borders and tariffs, pipelines and policing, “boomers” and “millennials,” healthcare and automation. Do advances in artificial intelligence spell the end of work as we know it? Are we on the verge of a postwork society? If so, is the crisis of work necessarily dystopian? To paraphrase Leonard Cohen: If work has become a crack in North American society and culture, what sort of light might stream through?

We are seeking contributions that address the following aspects of work, broadly conceived:

- (Non-)Representation of work in North American literature and culture
- Work and genre/form: proletarian literature, the office movie, the strike song, etc.
- Class formations and working-class histories
- Studies of workers and industries: manual and intellectual workers, white-collar/ blue-collar/ grey-collar/ pink-collar, care workers, fast food workers, digital workers, “playbor,” warehouse workers, Amazon Mechanical Turkers, artists, performers, etc.
- The university, academic labor, the work of professing
- Work and nation, nationalism, nation-building
- Electoral politics and the 2020 U.S. presidential election
- Settler colonialism and empire
- Race, ethnicity, indigeneity
- Slavery, incarceration, surplus populations
- North American work regimes in transnational and global perspective
- “They take our jobs!”: immigration, borders, citizenship
- Gendered/sexual divisions of labor, housework and the family, social reproduction, feminist, queer, and trans critiques of work
- Religions and the work ethic
- Work’s terminologies, etymologies, dialects, accents, slangs
- Not-work: unemployment, free time, leisure, play, anti-work
- Futures of work: technological unemployment, utopian/dystopian speculation, postwork imaginaries, Mincome, Universal Basic Income

Please send paper or panel abstracts of 200-300 words and a short biographical note by 31 March 2020 to [sanas2020@unisg.ch](mailto:sanas2020@unisg.ch). Contact the organizers at [jesse.ramirez@unisg.ch](mailto:jesse.ramirez@unisg.ch) and [sixta.quassdorf@unisg.ch](mailto:sixta.quassdorf@unisg.ch).