

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 40 (2021)

Artikel: Introduction : the work of work
Autor: Ramírez, J. Jesse / Quassdorf, Sixta
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-977033>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 05.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Introduction

The Work of Work

J. Jesse Ramírez and Sixta Quassdorf

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 more intensely, or under more desirable circumstances, or for better pay, but we all do it. You might be working right now. If you are reading an academic volume on work, you know what work is.

Yet like all fundamental categories, work grows in complexity as we examine it more closely. The terms "work," "labor," "effort," "toil," "job," "employment," "occupation," "profession," "vocation," 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. As we meditate on the breadth and depth of work, we may find ourselves in the position of the exasperated interlocutors in Plato's dialogues who start out confidently knowing what a concept means, then quickly confess their ignorance after trying to explain it.

Conversely, can we say what work is *not*? All of the activities gathered under the term "work" share the fact that they are, well, kinds of activity. Everything that lives, works. According to one of North America's greatest working-class intellectuals, Harry Braverman,¹ "all forms of life sustain themselves on their natural environment" (31). Yet for Braverman—

¹ A child of the Depression, Braverman worked as a coppersmith, pipefitter, and steel worker before becoming a publisher and editor in the 1950s.

and for Karl Marx, his main intellectual inspiration—work is more than appropriation. Work begins when life *transforms* an environment: “to seize upon the materials of nature ready made is not work; work is an activity that alters these materials from their natural state to improve their usefulness” (31). This definition is similar to the biologist’s and the physicist’s view that energy is the capacity to work and that work is in turn the expenditure of energy. One reason for the resemblance is that Marx’s understanding of work was influenced by the natural science concept of *Stoffwechsel* (metabolism) (see Fehrle, this volume) and by thermodynamics.

But approaching work and life with such wide latitude can become tautological. A life form is alive insofar as it uses energy to do something to something else, and this activity is what makes the life form alive. In a sense, work is difficult to think about for the same reason that fish cannot think about water: there is too much of it; it is everywhere; it is everything. Maybe only Gertrude Stein can define work: work is work is work.

In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976; rev. 1983), Raymond Williams agrees that “work” is “our most general word for doing something,” “activity and effort or achievement,” and the outcome of such activity, the thing done (266). The word’s “range of applications,” Williams observes, “has of course been enormous” (266). Apart from being the most general way to talk about doing things and the results of doing things, “work” partially shares the painful connotations of its cousin, “labor.” If work is not play, or is even the opposite of play, it is because work is laborious—a burden and curse. These associations are deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian societies. Labor is what Adam and Eve were condemned to do when they were expelled from Eden: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground” (Gen 3:19). Eve’s distinct punishment, to experience excruciating pain during childbirth, explains why delivery is called “labor.” The Italian *travaglio*, the French *travail*, and the Spanish *trabajo* have similar connotations of pain and derive from the Latin *tripalium*, an instrument used to torture slaves (Komlosy ch. 3).² When today’s prophets of automation proclaim that new technologies will soon liberate us from work, they assume that work—but not theirs, of course—remains a form of torture befitting a slave (see Elzway, this volume).

Literature and the arts are also a kind of work. We speak of “artwork,” “the work of art,” and “the collected works of Twain.” But on the whole,

² The English “travail” shares this etymology but is more literary and refers more broadly to “troubles.”

North American literary and cultural production is not nearly as interested in work as in love, crime, revenge, friendship, sex, or war, for example. Relatively few novels, poems, films, television shows, or plays are set in workplaces, and when they are, they rarely devote much of their attention to actual work. Perhaps this is because literary-cultural work is commonly understood to be the *opposite* of “work” as burdensome effort—not a curse but a creative, free, pleasurable, and honorable activity (Komlosy ch. 3). Braverman and Marx thought of work in this way when they dignified humans’ intentional, purposive work over animal instinct (Braverman 33–37). Hannah Arendt also distinguished work, which contributes to the durability of the world, from labor, which consumes it (79–174). Understood in this way, work begins where labor ends; work as freedom transforms and transcends labor as necessity.

Besides, did anyone really watch the sitcom *The Office* (2005–2013) for the rare moments when the characters were shown doing their actual work, selling paper? Who wants to read chapter upon chapter about driving a bus or ringing up customers at a cash register after spending several hours driving a bus or operating a register? Even Jim Jarmusch’s wonderful film *Paterson* (2016), about a bus driver/poet, only occasionally shows him driving his bus.

Bus driving points to a crucial historical qualification in Williams’s entry on “work” in *Keywords*. Much of what we now habitually call “work” or “labor” is a specific form of life-sustaining activity, namely, wage labor. While wage labor has existed since antiquity—soldiers are some of the oldest wage laborers—its pervasiveness is an effect of the relatively recent emergence and planetary dominance of capitalism. Once associated with temporary, irregular work, “job” now stands in for “normal employment” (267). We should understand this normality to refer not to a fixed status—not everyone *has* a job—but rather to a particular kind of compulsion to try to *get* a job. Under capitalist social relations of work, we not only have the *opportunity* to sell our capacity to work on the labor market in exchange for wages, which we again exchange in the market for life-sustaining goods and services. Rather, the market functions as an *imperative* to sell labor power (Wood 6–7), especially in market fundamentalist societies that have dismantled social welfare and can offer few ways to live in dignity without wages—if not one’s own then someone else’s. In the United States, jobs are the primary way to secure food and shelter, access to health care, and the possibility of provision in old age.

Thus, jobs are not strictly economic categories. The fact that the market determines so many aspects of people’s lives, and that most of us are expected to accept this condition and spend the greater portion of our

existence trying our luck on the market, is one of the most important, if also naturalized and obscured, political features of capitalist society.

The capitalist market's imperative is why the speaker in Levine's poem is waiting in line, in the rain, for work. His situation points to another major meaning of work: the existence of a social class composed of all—including those whose work is the work of art—who face the imperative to sell their time and abilities in the market. Work not only *is*, it *does*. As Kathi Weeks notes, "work produces not just economic goods and services but also social and political subjects" (8). Work generates not only wages for workers but also their social status and feelings of dignity. It not only locates subjects in the working class but also fuels their aspirations of class mobility. It generates "responsible" men and women and separates "productive" members of society from freeloaders, "illegals," and others who are not "us." The analysis of work must contend with how histories of class struggle, gendered and sexual divisions of labor, racial hierarchies, and citizenship regimes determine 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. Tithi Bhattacharya asks provocatively: "If workers' labor produces all the wealth of society, who then produces the worker?" (1). Who made breakfast for Levine's speaker? Who ironed his shirt?

Whatever work is or does, its analysis must navigate between the universality of life and the specificities of history, opportunity and imperative, necessity and freedom, curse and creativity, activity and subject formation, class and nation, race and gender. Ultimately, the question of work is worth asking because it does a great deal of work.

The contributions to this volume are exceptions to the general neglect of work in North American literary and cultural criticism. If we capture the nine chapters collected in this volume under one concept, we come to acknowledge that literature and related art forms, indeed, *do* work. This might not be news to the devotee, still we think it is inspiring and motivating to become aware of the manifold ways in which aesthetic representations are able to reveal, comment on, and question real-world conditions as well as derive future visions of our world by playing with and exploring the implications of the present. This kind of creative work is not only a helping hand in making sense of the world, but in many

cases, constitutes a voice of resistance to circumstances that are perceived to be harmful for both individual subjects and entire societies. The work of art thus reveals itself as a potential force able to shape the empirical world to which it relates. According to our collection, literature and germane art forms uphold a sense for human agency, which has become more relevant in times of a “24/7 capitalism” (Strätz, this volume). While some chapters approach the study of laboring literature from a formal perspective, others derive its pragmatic potentials from content and topic choice. However, what also becomes clear is that literature works in complex ways: neat distinctions between form and content, or for that matter, the fictional from the non-fictional world, are illusory. Literature as a “Foucauldian heterotopic space” (Rohleder, this volume) is not a counterpart to but relates to this world from which it is generated and to which it harks back in astounding variety and diversity.

Our volume starts off with Elizabeth Kovach’s proposal to broaden the labor of literary criticism by presuming a work-related approach. Based on Marxist concepts, she argues that literature as a cultural product and a discursive element in society is part of both the productive base and the discursive superstructure of capitalist societies. Hence, literature should/could also be analyzed as standing in a dialectic relationship to the social anxieties created by shifts and developments in contemporaneous modes of production. Kovach draws on studies by Cindy Weinstein, Nicholas Bromwell, and Jasper Bernes and convincingly illustrates how the work of literary criticism gains from a work-related approach. For instance, the tension between a contemporaneous mainstream taste for “deep” characters in 19th-century narratives on the one hand, and the use of allegory and flat characters in more experimental texts on the other (e.g., Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe), gains plausibility if analyzed in the light of growing anxieties about machine work in a period of rampant industrialization. Yet, as Kovach shows, literature is not only conditioned by contemporaneous modes of production but also harks back to general public perceptions and norms of labor so that a work-related literary criticism can effectively describe how literature is both shaped by and actively shapes the world in which it is produced and consumed.

Fabian Eggers implicitly continues Kovach’s argument. Discussing David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*, he casts a critical light on the communicative mastery of the renowned author. He detects parallels between neoliberal management strategies and the narrative strategies used by Wallace to create a specific attitude in his readers. Wallace makes his readership work hard intellectually and promises them a kind of

deferred gratification in the shape of an emotional reward—the feeling of belonging and spending intimate “quality-time” with the author when the task of understanding the text is achieved. Such an attitude is reminiscent of the Protestant work ethic, according to Eggers, including its moral dimension. Moreover, the emotional incentive to make readers “put in [their] own share of the linguistic work” (Wallace in McCaffery 138) is reminiscent of the emotional labor tactics of contemporary management that wants people to internalize the dictum: to “be *in* the company” means to act as if one “[i]s the company” (Hicks 118, original emphasis). Hence, Eggers’s chapter is another example of work-related criticism as proposed by Kovach. The widespread, almost unanimously positive public reception of Wallace’s oeuvre, which is unusually strongly influenced by the author’s own interpretations, may just illustrate the efficiency of contemporary emotion-directed management strategies, rather than reflect a critical or disruptive response.

Simon Trüb continues to explore the work of literary criticism in a chapter about the connections between the genre of tragedy and the real-world concepts of precariousness and precarity (cf. Butler). While precariousness as the ontological vulnerability of the human condition can be matched with the concept of tragedy as an “existential homelessness” (cf. Felski), precarity in the sense of insecure access to means of survival and political representation tends to be excluded from the tragical as too mundane. Trüb argues that the exclusion of precarity from the tragic (to prevent generic trivialization) is ideologically biased because the distinction between precarity as “mundane” suffering and the more worthy, metaphysical suffering of precariousness creates social hierarchies. Such a narrow concept of the tragic justifies unequal distribution of precariousness among human beings, with the result that some are more affected by precarity than others. In contrast, if the generic concept of tragedy is applied broadly, it implies a democratization of suffering. Consequently, Trüb contends that the full impact of plays such as *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks and *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage can only be grasped if the plays are recognized as tragedies: the generic tension between fate and (limited) freedom of agency and responsibility can thus be related to the tensions between contemporary structural racism and class oppression vs. individual mistakes. Thus, the basically tragic structures of contemporary neoliberal society come to the fore. Moreover, by accepting the conceptual relatedness of precariousness and precarity, viewers are goaded towards cathartic self-reflection. They are likely to embrace the suffering displayed as a general human condition to which they themselves are also subjected; they experience solidarity and

empathy rather than maintaining an emotional distance and merely witnessing the suffering of the “other.”

The Butlerian concepts of precariousness and precarity are, according to Anne M. Mulhall, also thematized in Anne Boyer’s *Garments Against Women*. Boyer’s prose poems particularly highlight the vulnerability and precarity of women in a world where “all human activity is reduced to economic productivity” (Mulhall, this volume). Accordingly, Mulhall approaches Boyer’s poems from a feminist perspective, yet not exclusively. She draws on Anna Cavarero’s concept of inclination, which she combines with Giorgio Agamben’s concept of potentiality. Inclination denotes our reciprocal awareness of and dependence on each other as vulnerable, fallible human beings, which is exemplarily expressed by the image of the Madonna with child. Potentiality, on the other hand, explores the meaning of “can” by establishing a space between the poles of “to be, or not to be.” As several of Boyer’s poems explicitly address the work involved in both writing and not-writing, Agamben’s concept lends itself to the exploration and extension of room for human agency, including ways of passive resistance, especially under the current neoliberal conditions. Based on close readings of several of Boyer’s poems, Mulhall suggests that Boyer examines the implications of what can be called a new paradigm of ethics: individual (masculine) rectitude and the neoliberal myth of clarity and invulnerability are contrasted with the reciprocal inclination of human beings in their fundamentally precarious condition. The latter not only serves as a feminine balancing phenomenon but offers itself as a veritable act of resistance to the harmful conditions that produce structural inequality and thus precarity.

Juliane Strätz also addresses the question of passive resistance in her chapter about Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. In her analysis of the novel, productive work becomes blurred with its apparent counterpart, rest, as the latter has become usurped as part of the production process by a system of “24/7 capitalism” (Strätz, this volume). Rest is recognized as the re-producer of the human energy needed for productive work. Moreover, an entire industry has developed around sleep and the proper way of resting successfully. As a consequence, traditional attempts to revolt and resist by refusing to work have become complicated in such a productive society: rest is bereft of its oppositional potential. In addition, consumption, another entangled factor in capitalist production, is even more difficult to refuse and thus cannot serve as a space of resistance either. By reading Moshfegh’s novel against Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and philosophical interpreters such as Slavoj Žižek, who hails Bartleby as a messiah of passive resistance, Strätz’s

reading offers a more critical evaluation of the effectiveness of Bartlebyan passivity. Instead, she foregrounds the narrative strategy of exaggeration that lays bare the absurdities of contemporary life. In view of such absurdities, readers may be led to understand the urgency of change and thus start to actively search for new forms of effective revolt.

The question of effective revolt and the role of consumption are also addressed in Christian Hänggi's chapter. He analyzes two episodes from the long-running TV show *South Park*. There, for the first time, the makers of *South Park* suspended their usual depiction of the working class as "white trash hicks" and showed them as articulate and politically engaged "worker/citizens" (Hänggi, this volume). According to Hänggi, rich visual and textual references nod to the long history of both American and European working-class struggles, which imply that the makers of these episodes see a structural link between the conditions of the working class in the 19th/early 20th centuries and in today's late capitalism. However, Hänggi's analysis of the episodes also suggests an awareness of differences. Today's workers have predominantly become consumers in a consumer society ("laborers" in Arendt's sense of the term). Consequently, companies such as Amazon (the reference is obvious) can effectively counter revolts such as strikes by banishing recalcitrant employees from the possibility of consumption. This denial has a dual effect: working-class men are humiliated and undermined in their still widely held patriarchal role as the provider of the family; more relevantly, they are deprived of their acquired identity as consumers. Hence, the efficiency of means of revolt such as strikes and traditional Marxist propaganda is ultimately questioned, but the need for alternative modes of resistance seems urgent. Otherwise, as the final image of happy but stoned people seems to suggest, a reversal to "white trash hicks" seems unavoidable.

Johannes Fehrle's chapter is also concerned with the representation of manual laborers. He addresses the pre-industrial practice of turning Black slaves into means of production by equating them with working animals that are part of nature rather than culture. By looking at slave narratives and their representation of nature in the broadest sense through a Marxist, ecocritical lens (work is "metabolism" between humans and nature), Fehrle argues that a neat distinction between "humans (as non-nature) and nature (as non-human)," which justifies both slavery and racial discrimination, is undermined. Paradoxically and tragically being means of production, Black slaves ultimately played a major part in the rise of North American capitalism.

While Fehrle explores the Black worker as means of production in the pre-industrial period in terms of being a part of nature, Salem Elzway analyzes the industrial Black worker as a means of production in terms of being a part of a machine, if not the machine itself. He examines the logic of automation in both science-fictional imagination and historical realization, which both associate the robot with the image of an ideal, obedient slave. Thus, on the one hand, Elzway points toward the work of literature as an inspirational force for real-world developments, and, on the other hand, toward the labor of automation in its historical context. In contrast to the ideology of technoliberalism, which believes in technical solutions for social and political problems, Elzway reveals that robots conceptualized as substitutes for slaves not only evoke racialized connotations but uncritically derive from a naturalized, (white) privileged claim that “hot, heavy and hazardous” work (Elzway, this volume), i.e., subhuman work, should be done by someone or something inferior. The question of whether and why such subhuman work is needed is never asked. Moreover, the historical practice of industrial robot work suggests that in the process of automation, workers are increasingly treated as mechanical slaves themselves, having to obey the rhythm of the machine rather than the other way round. Black workers in the U.S. are disproportionally doing such mechanical-slave jobs, which are prone to be replaced by industrial robots and create new types of subhuman work until these again are automated. Thus, Elzway holds that technoliberalism is not only a misleading ideology that reproduces rather than solves social problems, but that it also reinforces the racial divide. Disproportionately, Black workers are kept as dispirited, slave-like bodies functioning as “the appendage to the machine,” as the Marxian expression goes, until they are rendered superfluous as “a waste product of technological production” (Elzway, this volume).

Rebekka Rohleder’s chapter about Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Heart Goes Last* closes the volume by taking up the idea of surplus population as addressed by Elzway’s text. In Atwood’s fictional text, it is not so much that automation renders Black people irrelevant, but rather that an undefined, general economic and political collapse renders most of the population superfluous, regardless of skin color. However, Atwood’s “ustopic” solution is reminiscent of the real-world practice of incarcerating “superfluous” Black people (cf. Wacquant): the fictional village of Consilience is built around and economically dependent on a prison, and in relation to the world outside, Consilience is at best a golden cage. Using the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, Rohleder contends that the novel denounces not only the hypocrisy of a Protestant work ethic in

times of vanishing jobs but also visions of work as an organizing principle of a future society. Moreover, she suggests that the novel itself can be perceived as a heterotopian space that is not apart from but relates to the real world. Again, the effects of (speculative) literature are addressed—not from a historical perspective, as in Elzway's chapter, but from a conceptual angle. Literature is not only shaped by but also shapes the world. And its work not only moves along the cyclical mechanisms of classical dialectical thought, but also back and forth from a heterotopic space that offers so many more new perspectives on the world we live in.

References

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.
- Bhattacharya, Tithi. "Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory." *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*. Ed. Tithi Bhattacharya. London: Pluto, 2017. 1–20.
- Braverman, Harry. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. 25th anniversary ed. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2006.
- Felski, Rita. "Introduction." *Rethinking Tragedy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.
- Hicks, Heather J. *The Culture of Soft Work: Labor, Gender, and Race in Postmodern American Narrative*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Komlosy, Andrea. *Work: The Last 1,000 Years*. E-book ed., Verso, 2018.
- Levine, Philip. "What Work Is." *What Work Is*. New York: Knopf, 1991. 18.
- McCaffery, Larry. "An interview with David Foster Wallace." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993): 127–50.
- Wacquant, Loïs. "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh." *Punishment and Society* 3. (2001): 95–134.
- Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Social Reproduction*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011.
- Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. New York: Verso, 2002.

