Introduction: American Cultures of Work

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This special issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* contains six essays about American cultures of work. These essays have been selected, edited and organized in a way designed to reflect the regional, cultural and historical diversity of the subject. In this regard, the essays call renewed attention to the importance that work has played in American life. As editors, we use the phrase "renewed attention" advisedly, for we recognize ours is not a new subject for American Studies. The tapestry of the American consciousness is woven with threads spun from the ideals, realities, and cultural representations of work. Work has found its way into the most fundamental American representations. From the writings of Captain John Smith and the frontier ideals of the nineteenth century to the notions of consumerism and economic self-determination of contemporary America, work has been hailed as the agent of spiritual and financial success. This is a constellation that Americans often pride themselves on: as Calvin Coolidge so famously declared, "the chief business of the American people is business" (Foner 760). Such a declaration often empowers the American representations of work with a mythical sort of heroism. The American—at least, as Coolidge thought of the male, Anglo-European American—has been conceived of as a doer and a builder. Work is his trade, and its product is personal and national success.

As the essays in this special issue reveal, however, Coolidge's declaration requires modification in order to be applicable to a broader range of Americans and their experiences. These essays may be said to reflect the fact that the chief business of the American people is *work*—in all its manifestations. However subtle this distinction may be, it calls attention to how

American cultures of work often manifested themselves antithetically to business and capitalism. While the idea of business bespeaks the successes of profit and national progress, work has often been double-edged. While work may be the agent for personal success, it has also substantiated the realities of economic classism, social repression and racial slavery.

As a topic of study, in fact, realities and representations of American work call attention to struggle. In one great respect, this is a struggle that manifests itself on collective levels. The fight to organize skilled and unskilled workers into unions and to maintain the integrities of these unions figures prominently in American cultures of work. It hardly calls for new scholarship to recognize the ways in which American capitalism has stood as an obstacle to such labor organizations and the cultures they have fostered. Nor do we break new ground by observing how, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a great part of the business of America practiced, endorsed and profited from the business of slavery. In this way, American cultures of work are often synonymous with those cultures that have evolved out of U.S. labor history. There are cultures of work within trade unionism and the movements for civil rights and women's suffrage, to name only a few of the areas of struggle that have constellated U.S. labor history. Such social realities have been taken up in this special issue. For example, in her descriptions of the struggles of New Mexican workers in the nuclear industry, Lucie Genay identifies how the indigenous cultures of the American Southwest underwent radical transformation with the advent of the Los Alamos Laboratories, and how these transformations challenged the very fabric of traditional New Mexican society. David Brown's opening essay describes the struggles of the poor white farmer in the antebellum South, and his effort to remain economically self-sufficient in a society largely defined by his slave- and plantation-owning neighbors.

However, the struggle that is inherent in American cultures of work is also a personal struggle, and it would seem to manifest in the drive on the part of a worker to remain individuated and thus independent of his or her travails—to remain human in the face of work. This struggle is what Emerson decries in "The American Scholar" when he describes the state of society as being one "in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man." For Emerson, such as monstrosity results in the ultimate loss of the human whole, for as he goes on to state:

> Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book; the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship. (Emerson 52-53)

What Emerson decries, however, also allows us to perceive the complexity of American cultures of work. Individual abilities are commodified into distinct economic functions. This occurs while the diverse individual human "whole" is ignored in the name of a single function. Thus, the individual worker's personal complexity and the cultural dynamic that has fostered this complexity and amalgamated it into thought, organization, and labor become simplified and flattened into Emerson's monster. This metamorphosis precipitates the development of unique cultures of resistance. These cultures of resistance—whether they are divided and subdivided down to the level of persons, genders, racial groups, subcultures or economic classes—strive to (allow people to) be more than "the things" their members labor to do. As the essays of this special issue relate, such are the struggles of the slave, the travelling working pen, the factory worker, the human "exhibition," the sharecropper, the migrant farm laborer, the nuclear scientist, and the unmarried society woman. In each of these struggles, there is a culture of work in which the individual fights to retain his or her humanity.

However, to relegate American cultures of work solely to the idea of struggle diminishes the topic and misrepresents the essays that follow; work is both a positive and a negative; work enables and constricts. In the American context, work is a word whose definition is intimately merged with both leisure and culture. For example, William Gleason's *The Leisure Ethic* (1999) explores how the intensification of industrial labor during the nineteenth century generated fears about the devaluation of the Protestant Work Ethic: such fears prompted "play theorists" to formulate a "gospel of play" (3) that would provide employees with release from arduous factory work—albeit safely contained within the parameters of pro-capitalist ideology. But as Gleason shows, literary figures from Henry David Thoreau to Zora Neale Hurston reimagined the relationship between work and play in rather more creative and critical terms. In this special issue, James Dorson's essay operates along similar lines to Gleason's book by exploring how another major American author, Edith Wharton, interrogated the often hidden

links between leisure and labor, including "emotional labor" or affect, in *The House of Mirth.*

The title of this special issue also references the concept of "cultural work," and what has been called "the turn to cultural work" in contemporary scholarship (Banks, Gill and Taylor 4). The current interest in "cultural work" has obvious origins in contemporary phenomena: the much vaunted ascendancy of creative industries, the civic branding of "capitals of culture," and what Richard Florida has famously termed the "the rise of the creative class." Scholars across a variety of disciplines, such as sociology and critical theory, have noted that under "the cultural logic of late capitalism," "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" (Jameson 4). Hence those scholars have become interested in forms of "immaterial labor" (Banks, Gill and Taylor 3) that produce virtual or symbolic cultural commodities (rather than more traditional artisanal or industrial goods). Yet "the labor of cultural production" is hardly a new phenomenon: as Michael Denning noted in *The Cultural Front* (1997), "Culture had become an industry in the early twentieth century, and artists, musicians, and writers were laborers in that industry"—a key component of what Denning calls "the laboring of American culture" (xvi-xvii).

Moreover, within American Studies, and especially American literary studies, the term "cultural work" has been applied to even earlier periods, while accumulating a considerable history of its own. It is fully thirty-five years since Jane Tompkins called for the established criteria by which literary texts were assessed (the New Critical ideal of textual autonomy; the notion that a "classic" text was transcendently "timeless") to be reevaluated, and more critical attention to the "cultural work" performed by historically situated, so-called "sentimental fiction" such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Five years later, Philip Fisher argued that certain nineteenth-century American novels undertook significant "cultural work" in their "ambition to redesign the common world" by critiquing the "hard facts" of slavery, Native genocide, and capitalism (9). More recently, Ezra Cappell has devoted a book to "the cultural work of Jewish American fiction." Inevitably, American literary scholars have also reflected on the kind of cultural and "intellectual work" (Long 87) that they do themselves, perhaps most obviously through their role in establishing and revising U.S. literary canons along regional, national, and transnational lines.

In this issue, Elizabeth Fielder's discussion of El Teatro Campesino (ETC)—an activist Chicano/a theater group closely affiliated with Cesar

Chavez's United Farm Workers of America—offers an especially vivid demonstration of how cultural work is often inevitably political. Such work compels us to engage with what for Tompkins were "changing definitions of literary value" (34).[1] After all, as Fielder notes, ETC's brief polemical plays (*actos*) were often overtly radical, unambiguous, and performed without scripts by untrained, illiterate actors. Elsewhere, Temi Odumosu's contribution vividly demonstrates how visual as well as textual representations have performed powerful political-cultural work in the service of ideologies and institutions that today seem reprehensible. As Odumosu demonstrates, the cultural representation and circulation of black bodies through the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic World frequently "worked" on behalf of slavery and racism. Meanwhile, Anne Gessler's essay on early twentieth-century woman radio-operators unpacks the gender politics involved in "the labor of cultural production," as well as the efforts these women made to remain individuated in a creative way.

Naturally, the brevity of this special issue can in no way delimit the diverse variety of these cultures of work; nor, as editors, have we attempted to encompass the entirety of our topic. Rather, this special issue has been produced as an extension of a dynamic and wide-ranging conversation at the University of Copenhagen's Center for Transnational American Studies (CTAS) during its inaugural symposium in April 2013. The symposium, proposed by Andrew Miller and co-organized with Martyn Bone and Joe Goddard, took up "American Cultures of Work" as its organizing theme. Not coincidentally, some of the variegated social, historical, and cultural dimensions of work discussed at the symposium reflected recent research conducted by CTAS staff on (for example) the cultural history of women's work in the West; literary narratives of migrant labor within the U.S. South and Global South; physical and psychological migration patterns around U.S. cities; and the political and demographic ramifications of contemporary U.S.-Chinese relations. However, "cultures of work" was chosen as the symposium theme because it clearly had broader appeal to colleagues in American Studies and other disciplines within and beyond the University of

1 See Long for a useful critique of the "cultural work" turn in American literary studies. Long argues that what for Tompkins and her peers was a pioneering shift away from New Critical and other aesthetic-based approaches to literature itself quickly became "institutionalized" (89). Long suggests too that the cultural work approach is characterized by a liberal "moral and political consensus" (99) about the relationship between literature and political activism that has been insufficiently critiqued.

Copenhagen. As such, the initial announcement of the symposium invited participants to consider how "work has figured centrally in the American consciousness," and to reflect on how possible answers to ostensibly basic questions (Who can work? Where can they work? When can they work and for how long?) might have ideological as well as empirical ramifications. Participants were asked to consider too the cultural performativity of work, and how work has become laced into American historical and cultural artifacts.

The CTAS symposium featured two keynotes—historian David Brown (University of Manchester) and literary scholar Justin Edwards (University of Surrey)—alongside nine other speakers. These speakers included five faculty members of CTAS (Goddard, Miller, Bone, Cathryn Halverson, and Russell Duncan) as well as Temi Odumosu (Center for Geo-Genetics, University of Copenhagen), Jan Gustafsson (Center for Latin American Studies, University of Copenhagen), Elizabeth Fielder (University of Mississippi), and Rune Graulund (University of Strathclyde). In transforming the symposium into this special issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* the organizers *cum* editors have combined an eclectic selection of three presentations from the symposium with the three best essays received through an open call for papers issued via *ASinS*.[2]

Notwithstanding their multi- and interdisciplinary variety, the six essays that follow have been organized in broadly chronological order. Brown's opening essay, derived from his symposium keynote, reconsiders long-standing debates about labor in the antebellum South via a particular focus on poor whites, and through the prism of Frederick Law Olmsted's travel letters. Brown employs Olmsted's skeptical and somewhat controversial assessment of the "southern work ethic" (or lack thereof) as a springboard for a wide-ranging overview and analysis of antebellum labor relations in the region, as well as scholarly debates on the subject. Brown concludes with a persuasive, nuanced defense of the enduring value of Olmsted's own cultural work in letters that were, as Brown reminds us, written for publication (and payment) by the burgeoning New York media industry.

Where Brown focuses on the South and its narrative representation by a Northern visitor, Odumosu's essay begins with an individual case study—

2 We would like to express our gratitude to Anders Olsson, the outgoing editor of *American Studies in Scandinavia*, for his enthusiastic support of this special issue. We also wish to thank those contributors to the April 2013 "American Cultures of Work" symposium whose contributions do not feature in this issue.

Henry Moss, an African American farmer from Virginia whose vitiligo resulted in public exhibition of his body in person and on paper—before ranging beyond the region and nation to situate Moss in an Atlantic World system of racialized representation that, like Olmsted's rendering of "the cotton kingdom," was inextricable from the "hard facts" of slavery. Odumosu explores the troubling but revealing representations of so-called "white Negroes" like Moss, Mary Sabina of Cartagena (contemporary Colombia), and Amelia Newsham of London in images and texts that circulated throughout Europe and the United States.

The ideological power of art and representation also figures in James Dorson's reading of *The House of Mirth*, most obviously the penetrating assessment of Wharton's celebrated *tableau vivant* scene, during which Lily Bart mimics a 1776 painting by Joshua Reynolds. As Dorson demonstrates, the subtle skill and success of Lily's peculiar kind of cultural work in this scene is that she does not seem to be working at all. Rather, Lily's labor seems simply "natural"—at least to her suitor Lawrence Selden. By analyzing this and other key scenes from Wharton's novel with reference to theoretical work on affect, Dorson builds a persuasive argument—one that goes beyond existing critical readings of gendered forms of exploitation in the novel—about the "emotional labor" that Lily is required to perform without any form of economic compensation; indeed, without acknowledgement that she is laboring at all.

Mining oral histories, Lucie Genay's essay explores the changing concepts of work in New Mexico following the start of the Manhattan Project in 1941. New Mexicans of Chicano/a and Native origin experienced a radical change in their work cultures. This involved a sudden shift from subsistence agriculture to wage-based employment within the nuclear industry. Farming work that largely covered daily needs was replaced by abstract work where value and utility was determined by money. Providing the population stable and nearby work, the nuclear industry was originally hailed as a great benefit to an economic backwater, but it also introduced a range of problems that include land confiscation, racial discrimination, demeaning and often dangerous working conditions, and environmental hazards.

Anne Gessler's essay employs public discourse and memoirs to focus on the pioneering role of women as radio operators in the early twentieth century. Gessler describes how both highly skilled and autodidact women assumed important roles within the burgeoning field of radio telegraphy,

only to be systemically replaced—often by less qualified men—as the field developed into an industry and profession defined by a complex of corporations, unions, and the federal government. In Gessler's essay, then, the work in question is gendered in ways that might be compared to the tribulations that Lily Bart suffers in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, or the subjections that New Mexican workers experienced under the nuclear industry. Indeed, the essays by Gessler, Dorson and Genay all allude to an invisible work force: a body of individual and collected agents who strive for recognition and fairness in the face of impersonal dehumanizing cultural and industrial institutions.

It is hoped that this constellation lays the groundwork for the final essay, in which Elizabeth Fielder ponders the relationship between labor and culture in the activist art of El Teatro Campesino. Fielder locates ETC within the wider context of what Nelson Lichtenstein has called "the creative rediscovery of organizing strategies" throughout U.S. labor history. Hence, if Chavez and his Chicano migrant worker allies in the United Farm Workers revitalized—even revolutionized—U.S. labor struggle during the late 1960s, playwright Luis Valdez and ETC's worker-performers constituted a kind of cultural analog to that transformation. Indeed, Fielder identifies ETC as "an early precursor for social movement unionism," characterized by "worker-centered style of cultural activism." As Denning demonstrates in *The Cultural Front*, such activism was not entirely new to the United States: it played a significant role among the "proletarian avant-garde" groups of the Depression-era Popular Front. But as Fielder suggests, the cultural and political work of ETC might also be seen as a precursor for recent discussions within hemispheric American Studies regarding what José David Saldívar has called "trans-Americanity." It is notable too that however much the *campesinos*' political and cultural power was constrained by California's agribusiness industry, they retained considerably more agency over their representation (even or especially when, as Fielder shows, they were satirizing their own stereotypical identities) than the likes of Moss, Sabina, and Newsham—and perhaps even Lily Bart—could possibly imagine.

As stated at the beginning of this introduction, this special issue has not attempted to encompass or delimit a subject as broad and diverse as American cultures of work. Rather, we have sought to select and present an eclectic array of essays that will lead to still further discussion within American Studies, for finally we recognize that American Studies is itself a culture of

work—or, if you prefer, a discipline that does "cultural work." Americanists labor, either collectively or alone, to disseminate their insights, findings and perspectives in ways that enrich the field. As this metaphor of enrichment suggests, work—in its most fundamental and agricultural manifestation—is central to a fertile future for American Studies.

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