

American Un/Freedoms

SANAS Biennial Conference
November 5-6, 2026, University of Zurich

Conference Directors: Prof. Katharina Gerund & Prof. Barbara Straumann

The United States Semiquincentennial offers a unique moment to reflect on the various entanglements and meanings of freedom and unfreedom in US politics, society, and culture: The Declaration of Independence signals the new nation's freedom from British rule, the beginning of liberal democracy, and a striving towards liberty for all. At the same time, the promise of freedom and liberation for some Americans has always been preconditioned on the unfreedom of others. The US nation-state is built on enslavement, the dispossession and genocide of Indigenous populations, as well as the disenfranchisement of marginalized groups. As a contested term, *freedom* has been put into the service of various emancipatory agendas, but it has also been used to affirm and justify power hierarchies, exploitation, and subjugation – a phenomenon that Elisabeth Anker has aptly called “ugly freedom.”

From the American Revolution to the Civil War, from World War II to the so-called Forever Wars, American warfare and imperialism have often been conducted under the banner of advancing freedom and democracy. Drawing on an exceptionalist discourse, the US has branded itself as the “land of the free” from its very inception while denying citizenship, individual rights, and essential freedoms to parts of its own populace throughout its history. Japanese Americans, for instance, were forced into internment camps and Americans lived in a segregated society while their country entered World War II to fight for the four universal freedoms famously promoted by FDR (freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear). Today, the US has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, which disproportionately affects African Americans, and, as Rinaldo Walcott reminds us, Black people may live in a state of emancipation but remain essentially unfree. The current backlash against the achievements of the liberation movements of the 20th and 21st century and the expansion of individual rights – from the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* to the scaling back of DEI initiatives and from nativist ideologies to book bans, censorship, and far-right rewritings of US history – urges us to (re)consider the meanings of American un/freedoms in contemporary political discourses and cultural productions, including their various genealogies and possible effects. The growing illiberal tendencies (not just) in the US also offer a powerful reminder of the precariousness of social progress and of the fact that, as Angela Davis has put it, “freedom is a constant struggle.”

We therefore invite contributions that examine the current state of American un/freedoms including their legal, economic, and cultural dimensions and their historical ramifications with an eye to literary and cultural representation as well as political and social issues. Whose individual rights, liberties, and freedoms matter when and why? Which unfreedoms are tacitly accepted, and which are explicitly cast as necessary, for example, in the name of (national) security? Which different meanings have been assigned to the term *freedom* by political actors from across the ideological spectrum, and how have literary and cultural representations negotiated questions of un/freedom in the US (and beyond)?

Keynote Speakers

Prof. Elisabeth Anker (George Washington University)

Prof. Heike Paul (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Prof. Rinaldo Walcott (State University of New York at Buffalo)

Possible contributions may include but are by no means limited to:

- freedom of speech and discourses on censorship (e.g. book bans, “cancel culture,” or hate speech)
- individual rights and bodily autonomy (e.g. marriage equality, reproductive rights, or access to health care)
- religious freedom
- gun culture and second amendment rights
- the histories of (il)liberalism in the US and beyond
- philosophical discourses on (the interconnections between) freedom, liberty, and individual rights
- temporalities of freedom (e.g. perceived loss of freedom or future promises of freedom)
- spatial dimensions of freedom (e.g. the myth of the West and the notion of “free land” or Canada as haven for formerly enslaved African Americans)
- US imperialism and warfare
- settler-colonialism and Indigenous sovereignties
- freedom fighters in the cultural imaginary of the US
- African American and Black diasporic narratives of enslavement, emancipation, and freedom
- immigration, citizenship, and human rights
- discourses on incarceration and narratives of imprisonment

Proposals for both individual papers (20 minutes) and pre-formed panels (90 minutes) are invited. Paper proposals should comprise an abstract of 250 words, 5 keywords, and a 100-word bio. Panel proposals should add a 250-word panel abstract.

Please send your proposals by **March 31st, 2026**, to both barbara.straumann@es.uzh.ch und katharina.gerund@es.uzh.ch. Acceptance notifications will be send out by the end of April 2026.

Conference Proceedings

A *SPELL* volume is planned to result from the conference, within the customary fast turnaround time.