



On Working with Williams: Five Female Perspectives

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Victoria Allen (CAU Kiel): Williams at 100: Pale, Male and Stale? A 'Crisis' of Finding Women Contributors that Work with Williams

As part of collaborating on this special issue of *Coils of the Serpent*, which seeks to readdress Raymond Williams' work at the present conjuncture to think and theorize of ways of beyond crisis, I came to my own stumbling point. As someone who takes pleasure, encouragement and inspiration from Williams' contributions to Cultural Studies I saw the year of his centenary as a welcome opportunity to re-read and re-engage with his work both in my own writing and teaching.¹ Yet, as a cultural theorist and feminist, I found myself returning and reflecting on if it made sense to continue to promote the work of an established and published writer and academic, who may be deemed as 'pale, male and stale'?²

Needless to say, this special issue on "Beyond Crisis" does not just aim to celebrate Williams' work but to reread, reappraise and readdress his writing in regards to theorizing and approaching crisis in its various guises. And, as editors, we hoped that this topic would provoke or inspire responses from diverse backgrounds. Yet, when the proposals arrived, I was struck by the scarcity of articles submitted by women. Since *Coils of the Serpent* is the journal for the study of contemporary power, I wanted to take this opportunity as joint editor to delve into this matter that forms the bedrock of the journal. Reflecting on the power mechanisms and processes in academic publishing, I see this as an occasion to question, rethink and reshape publishing practices. In this case, providing a platform for female writers. A further consideration was that the

¹ Victoria's PhD thesis – *Industrial Memory in North(east)ernness: A PopCultural Portfolio* (defended 2021) – was inspired and informed by Williams' notion of culture is ordinary, and is a central tenet in her pedagogical approach to her teaching on Irish and English Literature and Cultural Studies (specifically on music and football culture, exhibitions and audio-visual media including adverts, films and television series) in Cultural and Media Studies at the English Seminar at Christian-Albrechts-Universität (CAU) Kiel, Germany.

² The phrase 'pale, male, and stale' was reportedly first coined by NASA administrator Daniel Goldin in 1992 (cf. Lawler 1996).



writing process of this special issue coincided with the lockdown period of the Covid-19 pandemic; a period which has contributed to gender inequality in research productivity, as recent studies have shown, where women academics published significantly less than their male colleagues (Cui, Ding, Zhu 2020; King and Frederickson 2020; Rusconi, Netz, Solga 2020: 24-26).

This focus of the present issue aligned with the current climate, raises the question: what about Williams and women? True, feminism and gender studies were not at the fore of his literary argumentation and work. This is evident in that his 1983 expanded edition of his 1976 *Keywords* did not contain an entry for terms such as gender, sexuality or women, though the terms 'Man' (1983 [1976]: 188-89) and 'Sex' (ibid.: 283-86) were included in his vocabulary of culture and society. This omission was revisited (remedied, revived) in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2008), edited by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris. Yet, this omission does not mean to suggest that gender inequality was something to which Williams was oblivious. His reflections on power imbalances did include gender relations, as can be seen in his essay "Towards Many Socialisms" where he specifically draws attention to how women are exploited in terms of labour and the value accredited to human work in terms of social production and care. Work, which Williams states, "had been specialized to women and then arrogantly excluded from 'productive-work' and from social and material recognition and respect" (1989f [1985]: 310). A further example is the 1987 interview "The Practice of Possibility" in which Williams is asked by Terry Eagleton why, compared to his fiction where the interplay between family and generations, politics and work feature prominently, his "theoretical work would seem to have preserved a relative silence to those issues" (1989c [1987]: 318), which included the aspects of gender relations. Williams responded:

[...] all this is a repression not only of women's experience but of something much more general. And I suppose I found it easier to explore that in more personal terms, in my novels. That's no real excuse; I ought to have been doing this in my other work too; but by the time I came to understand it in that way it was already being done by a lot of good people who were no doubt making more sense of it than I could have done. (1989c [1987]: 319)

Eagleton's concerns were pertinent over thirty years ago, so, along with Williams' response denoting that others were better positioned and more advanced in their thinking than he, there is little doubt that there should be caution in lauding and venerating work that feels out of step with contemporary positions on gender and feminist concerns. Indeed, my own niggling unease grew uncomfortably as others I engaged on the matter in conversation shared similar misgivings. I felt this needed to be addressed. And if not exactly a confrontation, a reckoning of sorts was needed.



As part of my reflections on the value and use of Williams' writing at the present conjuncture to think beyond crisis, I began to think what Williams' expansive work on "culture as a way of life", "structures of feeling", power relations and inequalities, literature, class and key cultural studies terminology (to name but a few) means for the experience and work of non-male, female-identifying, women academics and teachers today. To find some answers to these questions, I asked a select number of female academics to create a tableaux of reflections, impressions and experiences of women using Williams' writing for their work.

In collaboration with Ingrid von Rosenberg (and with the support of Harald Pittel and Florian Cord), we set out to investigate the changing "structures of feeling" around working with Raymond Williams' writing in his centenary year. For this collective reflection, we devised a set of questions which: would provide a platform for women's reflections of their experiences of work and research; would help capture Williams' ongoing relevance by finding out which aspects or pieces of his writing are the ones people like to return to and still resonate today; and would also help ascertain in what other ways his work and thoughts could be directed and applied and give an idea of what other writings could be of interest to continue those lines of inquiry. With this in mind, the following three set of questions were sent to a selection of women academics at different stages of their academic careers, from early career researchers to those strongly established in the field, who had in the past or recently worked with and on Williams:

- Could you please tell me about your introduction to the work of Raymond Williams?
- Over the years, what theoretical piece of work of Raymond Williams has reappeared in your teaching and cultural studies reading, writing and research? Which passages do you find yourself returning to?
- What limitations do you see when reading Williams' work from today's perspective? Why? How, in your opinion could these be overcome? Who else should we be turning to instead?

The following are the collated answers of five women academics who found and took the time to respond to our inquiry.



Ingrid von Rosenberg (TU Dresden): Raymond Williams' Importance for My Academic Research and Teaching

First we have the reflections of Ingrid von Rosenberg, a central figure in introducing and promoting British Cultural Studies in Germany. She wrote her PhD Der Weg nach oben: Englische Arbeiterromane 1945-1978 on British working-class fiction, which aligned with Williams' interests and analysed his novels on the subject that had been published so far. Our exchange helped to create the set of questions which form the base of this collaborative essay, as can be seen in the following.

Where, why and in what context did you first come across Raymond Williams' writings?

I cannot say exactly when I first came across his writings. It must have been in the early 1970s, and perhaps my friend H. Gustav Klaus, who translated some of Williams' texts into German (e.g. Williams 1977) may have given me a hint. In 1970 (after three years at home looking after my son), I got my first academic job as an assistant in the English Seminar of the Free University Berlin, teaching English literature. Cultural Studies as a special discipline of English Studies did not yet exist, but Williams became one of the researchers who turned the attention of literary studies to a new direction. It was the time when New Criticism, which had been the dominating theoretical approach during the post-war decades, lost its influence, and interest in the historical and sociological conditions of literary productions, often combined with a left-wing perspective, moved centre stage. The fresh and rebellious literature of the so-called Angry Young Men, born into the working class and writing about the reality of working-class life in the 1950s and 1960s, had roused wide interest, while in "high literature", so far considered the only literature worthy of academic attention, people from this background had at best appeared as minor characters. Raymond Williams, in his *Culture and Society* of 1958, for his part, had developed a new perspective on literature from 1780-1950, highlighting authors not counted among the classics, for instance, the industrial novelists, William Morris, George Gissing, D.H. Lawrence, and George Orwell. Williams saw in them authors who had sensitively reacted to the historical developments which became manifested in new meanings of old terms: *industry* had come to mean manufacture; *democracy* no longer meant only a form of government, but the struggle for representation; *class*, replacing the older term *rank*, included whole layers of society; the meaning of *art* was reduced to creative art, while the meaning of *culture* had become wider: it did no longer cover only "high culture" but came to be used to define "a way of life". I think his book partly inspired me to write my PhD thesis on the very rich working-class fiction of the – then – present day. As Williams himself had written two novels about working-class characters, of course, I included them in my study as well as a chapter on his theory as the ideological background.



You mentioned you had met Williams in person. How did that come about, what impression did you get of the person himself?

I simply wrote to him – he was professor of Theatre Studies at Cambridge and a member of Jesus College – asking if he would be willing to talk to me about my PhD project during my next stay in Britain. Unfortunately, I do not have his answering letter anymore, but to my pleasant surprise he wrote in a very open and friendly manner, not at all condescendingly, and suggested a time for a meeting at his college. I was only too happy to make the trip from London, where I did research at the British Library. I cannot remember what exactly we spoke about – too long ago. But I remember he was very kind and earnest, treating me like a fellow academic in answering my questions seriously, though I was so much younger and had not much achieved – he was obviously a good professor to his students, keen on helping them along. Maybe it also pleased him a little that the new interest in British working-class literature had spread to Germany. He was also very helpful in suggesting some more writers and texts to me, among them Jack Lindsay and Margot Heinemann, whom I also met later, but Margot Heinemann was not nearly as friendly as Williams.

Over the years, what theoretical piece of work of Raymond Williams has reappeared in your teaching Cultural Studies?

For me *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961) became Williams' most important works, though I must stress that – of course – he was not my only inspiration: Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, Terry Eagleton, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Sheila Rowbotham and many others also had a formative influence. I actually began teaching Cultural Studies only in the 1990s, after I had been appointed Professor for British Cultural Studies at the Technical University Dresden and became the first Vice President of Britcult, the Society for the Study of British Cultures. In my application for the job in Dresden I had explicitly quoted Raymond Williams' credo "culture is a way of life" as one of the guiding ideas for my teaching in the future. Earlier on, I had included Cultural Studies perspectives in teaching English literature, for instance, in the choice of authors and texts (including not only working class novelists and dramatists, but also documentary and autobiographical literature, for example), and in paying due attention to the intellectual and social conditions under which the works were produced (e.g., the state of women's emancipation as background to the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, George Egerton, Virginia Woolf, etc.). The book market and the exchange of German and English literature as well as translation studies were also topics to be included – which led to practical exercises and the publication of some books translated by a group of students and me. In my new position in Dresden, I could extend the cultural productions analysed in seminars and lectures to include film, the visual arts, photography, architecture. And I could include as topics the various forms of



popular culture, questions of cultural identity (Black and Asian British, Scottish, Irish, etc.), power relations (e.g., master-servant relationships), the state of class relations (changing forms of work; coping with unemployment; the situation of the working class in the North East under the condition of structural change) as represented in the various media, and also historically changing attitudes (e.g., to education, sexuality, gender relations) and cultural theories.

Williams' theoretical insight that culture "can never be reduced to its artifacts" (1960 [1958]: 343) was fundamental for this wider perspective. He argued against a hierarchy of human activities and also against seeing art and other activities, for instance politics, as completely "separate orders": "Politics and art, together with science, religion, family life and other categories we speak of as absolutes, belong in a whole world of active and interacting relationships, which is our common associative life" (Williams 1965 [1961]: 55-56). And again: "The art is there, as an activity, with the production, the trading, the politics, the raising of families" (ibid.: 61). This an important difference to the Marxist view, according to which the economy is the "base" which influences all other activities like politics, the arts, rituals, etc., which are seen as part of the "superstructure". By contrast, Williams defined culture as "a whole way of life" (1960 [1958]: 20, 301, etc.), "the general state of intellectual development in a society", which is embodied in the particular relationships between the various fields of activity. To study a particular culture, he saw it as necessary to study these relationships, which form a characteristic pattern: "A key-word, in such analysis, is pattern" (Williams 1965 [1961]: 63). Further, he argued that a culture is always based on the solidarity of its members (ibid.: 318), meaning that all individual members with their different activities contribute to it: it is important to "[to] achieve diversity without creating separation" (1960 [1958]: 353).

Williams was inspired by anthropology which traditionally researched not only the artefacts of an ancient or foreign culture, but also its rituals, beliefs, human relations, ways of production etc. Dealing with earlier British cultural theorists like F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot, Williams welcomed an extension of the concept by T.S. Eliot, who had included examples of popular culture such as certain sports, food, some architecture and music, but Williams objected: "The characteristic 'activities and interests' [of British society] would also include steelmaking, touring in motor-cars, mixed farming, the Stock Exchange, coalmining, and London Transport" (1960 [1958]: 250). Admitting that "[a]ny list would be incomplete" (ibid.), Williams instead pointed to the particular pattern all intellectual activities and social relationships form in a given society. British culture, as described by Williams, was made up of bourgeois AND working-class cultures, and he realised that "the crucial distinction is between alternative ideas of the nature of social relationships" (ibid.: 344). While he saw bourgeois culture as characterised by individualism and the idea of service, in working-class culture the ideas of the "common



good” (ibid.: 92), and “solidarity” (ibid.: 348) seemed central to him, and had produced collective democratic institutions such as the trade unions, the cooperative movement, and a political party (ibid. 346). Most importantly, however, Williams saw both bourgeois and working-class culture as “sub-cultures” (though he does not use the term), i.e., not as opponents, but as complementing each other: “In our culture as a whole, there is both a constant interaction between these ways of life and an area which can properly be described as common to or underlying both” (ibid.).

A further important part of Williams’ theory was that he saw the formation of a culture in a constant process of change, which makes it difficult for later generations (but also to the “visitor, the learner, the guest”) to fully understand a given culture at a particular moment in time. For to understand its organisation fully “a felt sense of the quality of life” is needed (Williams 1965 [1961]: 63), “the actual experience through which [the elements of a culture] were lived” (ibid.: 64). To grasp this difficult-to-describe particular element of lived experience, shared by the members of community at a historical moment, he invented the term “the structure of feeling” (ibid.). And he argued that the art of a period is the best interpreter (my term) of the feeling of a past time:

For here, if anywhere, this characteristic is likely to be expressed; often not consciously, but by the fact that here, the only examples we have of recorded communication that outlives its bearers, the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon. (Williams 1965 [1961]: 65)

Being a literary person, he found his examples in literature (though films could also serve as good examples) and deemed the realist tradition as especially useful, “the kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons” (1965 [1961]: 304). In a rather normative attitude, he criticised the “personal novel of today” (as a negative example he points to Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*), because it “exclude[s]” society and focuses on very few individuals (ibid.: 312). And he demands a “new realism” (ibid.: 316), for “in the highest realism, society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons, through relationships, in fundamentally social terms” (ibid.: 314). In his own fiction, Williams tried to comply with this ideal.

From today’s point of view, much of Williams’ construct can be criticised. Thus, his idea of the harmonious cooperation of the privileged and under-privileged social classes in building a common culture, seems idealistic or even naïve (though it was an important step to up-value working-class and popular culture as worthy objects of academic study) – we all know that the working classes had to fight hard to be able to contribute their share to the “common culture”. To his honour, it has to be said that Williams was not blind to reality, but – already in the last chapter of *The Long Revolution*



of 1961 – he observed dangerous developments in British society (a weakening of democracy and working-class institutions, growing money-mindedness under a capitalist economic system), threatening a harmonious progress for all. This disillusion became more marked in his later theoretical writings and fiction. But it remains somewhat amazing that Williams applied his definition of culture only to British society and to the white members of its middle and working classes – he did not pay attention to the aristocracy (which in many ways always was, has been and still is a model for many middle-class people), nor – and this is even more astonishing – to the already considerable number of immigrants from the former colonies, who had to negotiate between their home culture and British culture plus coping with xenophobia, nor did he include other European, American, African, or Asian societies. Nor was he conscious of gender differences and women’s disadvantaged position. Nevertheless, his insight that culture does not only mean artefacts but is “a whole way of life” is valid and could then be applied to all other social groups, for instance to the Black and Asian communities in Britain or youth cultures, and gave us a great freedom to choose our teaching topics.

Therefore, when I began teaching Cultural Studies in introductory courses, I always started from collecting the students’ ideas about “what is culture?”. We wrote terms with “culture” or “cultural” on the blackboard (e.g., culture vulture, *Kulturbeutel*, minister of culture, western culture, a culture of palm trees, etc.) and discussed their meaning. Then we read relevant texts on the term by anthropologists, C.P. Snow (*The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*), F.R. Leavis, T.S. Eliot, and finally Williams. We read his definition in his book of *Keywords* (1976) and some of the passages quoted above in a somewhat extended form. Thus, the students were prepared – and usually liked – to investigate the manifold forms of cultural activities in British society in past and present, represented in various forms of cultural production.

Emily Cuming (Liverpool John Moores University): Thoughts on Williams

Another fellow literature scholar whose work looks at working-class writing, though from an autobiographical and female perspective, is Emily Cuming, who is also an editor of the Williams-inspired journal Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism and is affiliated with the Raymond Williams Society.

My first introduction to Williams was through his 1958 essay “Culture is Ordinary”, which I encountered on a cultural theory course as part of my MA in literature which led on to doctoral research. As a PhD student I would come to focus on the genre of autobiography, but I often found myself distracted by an interest in forms that didn’t quite fit into what I thought of as autobiographies *per se* – theoretical essays that segued into theory, for example, or novels that seemed like thinly-disguised memoirs. Those



intersections of auto/biography, theory and creative writing (what Williams describes as the ‘multiplicity of writing’ in *Marxism and Literature*) are now at the heart of the things I research and study, but at the time I found it hard to make sense of the boundaries of autobiography, and was troubled by a general sense I’d acquired that there was something rather limitingly individualist – indeed ‘bourgeois’ – about the genre and its unabashed aim of placing the individual self centre-stage. Williams’ essay helped me think about these issues. In “Culture is Ordinary”, it was the clear, narrative opening in Williams’ prose that drew me in immediately. The bus stop outside a cathedral seemed such a refreshingly mundane beginning for cultural analysis, and Williams’ use of the first-person pronoun seemed poised and open-ended. This was grounded theory in the literal sense of the term. It offered a time, place and setting; the start of a journey; a first-person protagonist and an address to the reader. It was theory that invited its reader in, that sought to take you on a journey through a landscape that seemed tangible and ‘real’, but that once you settled into it, unexpectedly and seamlessly offered a more distanced and abstract interpretation of culture, history, community and the individual. Multiple borders in this landscape are made visible and we see these in a combined use of the close-up view, and what Williams would call in *Border Country* ‘longsightedness’.

Williams was a brilliant reader of literary form and tone, and he knew how to deploy these techniques in his own writing. In “Culture is Ordinary”, the critical work *The Country and the City* (1973) and the novel *Border Country* (1960), he used the autobiographical voice not just as part of his political argument – insisting that learning, literature and other forms of culture were native to his own Welsh family and community – but also as a rhetorical device. For example, in a way that was intimate without being confessional, Williams refreshingly deployed the use of the autobiographical voice in *The Country and the City*, a book which returns insistently to the politics of locations and viewpoints. In a literary survey running the gamut from Alexander Pope to Agatha Christie, Williams shows how ‘ways of seeing’ (by which he means ways of writing, reading and interpretation) are historically constituted and established – from landowners who looked out at the ‘pleasing prospects’ afforded to them from the views sloping down from their properties, to the close-up view of the stranger jostling past in the crowded Victorian city, to self-reflexive moments in which Williams depicts himself looking out from his study window in Cambridge.

Williams’ work continues to inform my work today on working-class autobiographies and they continue to evince some of his key claims. His simple declaration that “culture is ordinary” would have come as no surprise to the hundreds of autobiographers, from the nineteenth-century on, who took it upon themselves to describe in personal and anthropological detail their family life, homes, social environment, practices, and forms of learning, their landscape and cityscapes, their



appreciations of language, books, art and music. And when I came to write about the experience of the ‘scholarship’ boys and girls in my monograph, *Housing, Class and Gender in Modern British Writing 1880-2012*, Williams’ description and analysis of that ambivalent condition – also touched on in *The Country and the City* and *Border Country* – were constant reference points. That the personal is political – and that the first-person voice had a place in theoretical and cultural commentary – would of course become a commonplace in feminist writing from the 1970s onwards. Writers such as Carolyn Steedman, Sheila Rowbotham, Andrea Levy, Hazel V. Carby and Lynsey Hanley, among others, have gone on to articulate more fulsomely the gendered inflections of modern versions of the ‘scholarship girl’ trajectory, with an added emphasis on key questions of embodiment, domesticity, clothing, material culture, and the specific social expectations placed upon girls. These writers’ emphasis on the complexity of the view from *within* the interior, combined with their depiction of the girl’s internalisation of how she is seen by others, have added new and important dimensions to Williams’ theorisation of historically located viewpoints and ways of writing. I am also struck now, when reading accounts of girlhood conjured up by an earlier generation of working-class women writers looking back to girlhoods of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by the number of autobiographers who *did not* cross the border to become scholarship girls; in significant numbers these women writers recall how parents or teachers neglected to put them forward for the 11 plus exam or equivalent, or uniforms were deemed unaffordable, or they were needed at home and brothers went in their place. Educational progression, in these cases, was simply cut short; there was no trajectory or journey outward in that sense. But these women did cross another border in eventually putting into writing their own autobiographies, that most ‘ordinary’ of genres (at least in one sense of that complex keyword). It is Williams’ work that has helped me to appreciate and re-evaluate the place of autobiography then, and to insist on a methodology that provides both the close-up (or close reading) of these ‘ordinary’ life stories, while also pulling back to that more distanced view in which collectively they can be seen as part of a varied, always shifting historical and cultural landscape.

Phoebe Braithwaite (Harvard University): Wales and Beyond

Phoebe Braithwaite tells us how interest in Williams can be biographically inspired. She is working on her PhD on Stuart Hall and the New Left at Harvard University and recently presented on “Our Mongrel Selves: Stuart Hall and the Multiplicity of Raymond Williams” as part of “The Centenary Symposia: Raymond Williams in an Age of Globalization”.

I knew the name Raymond Williams long before I came to be acquainted with his work. I am not sure when I first heard of him, though I assume it was at university. My maternal grandparents were Welsh – one from Pontypridd and the other from mid-Wales,



Tregaron – and, though I doubt they had heard of him, he was synonymous for me with a certain strain of self-education and collective dignity that, as I felt it growing up, belonged to the Welsh. It was only much later that I encountered him properly, at first through his 1958 essay “Culture is Ordinary”, and was drawn into the long, recursive patterns of his speech and thought.

“I speak in a different idiom, but I think of these same things”, he wrote in that essay, attempting to account for both the continuity and the breach involved in going from the Welsh border town of Pandy to Cambridge University, and being the first of his immediate family to do so. Something about the cadence in that voice drew me in, enabling me to understand more clearly the precise nature of the spiritual and biographical affiliation between Williams and his friend and collaborator Stuart Hall, who is the subject of my PhD thesis.

What is the relationship between Raymond Williams and what is sometimes termed the Black Atlantic tradition? What debt do feminists owe Williams, who so rarely discussed the issues that affect women as a group? What do those working in the diverse political traditions affiliated with cultural studies achieve through their engagement with Williams, whether direct or indirect? Williams’ receptive mode of engagement, despite the often stolid and verbally abstract character of its delivery, has left indelible traces on the intellectual currents formed in his shadow. Those moved by Williams’ example, such as Edward Said, Cornel West and Juliet Mitchell, often come back to Williams’ characteristic openness in accounting for the impression his work had upon their thought. Across his long career, readers and collaborators came to know many ‘Williamses’ – a thinker who, as Hall would have it, “kept on thinking”.

Hall, who during the 1990s echoed Paul Gilroy’s critique of Williams for his exclusionary emphasis on settled communities and rooted identities, also saw that there was another side to Williams, one that connected him to people with different experiences from his own. Despite the significant silences in his work on questions to do with race and imperialism, gender and sexuality – despite Williams’ unease within the idiom of identity – there is much that Hall, among so many others, found generative in his work and mode of engagement and that draws me to him too.

“The shock of moving from a Welsh border town to the environs of Oxbridge could only have been experienced as a kind of subjective rupture”, Hall wrote in his 1983 lecture “Culturalism”, explaining Williams’ significance for the development of Cultural Studies (Hall 2017 [1983]). This rupture, he goes on, “is not unlike the experience of migration” (ibid.). As Williams describes in so many places – in “Culture is Ordinary” and his novels, particularly *Border Country* (1960), texts that have been important to me in thinking through not only the nature of his influence but the meaning of cultural identity more generally – he dwells in that subjective rupture, opening himself however



surreptitiously to the experiences of others: “I speak a different idiom, but I think of these same things” (1989b [1958]: 4). Juliet Mitchell, registering Williams’ impact after his death, at an event chaired by Hall at the British Film Institute, records the “unconscious influence” of Williams on her work and that of her generation and goes on to understand the gaps and absences in his work as present ones: absences to be parsed, not only decried.

In that 1983 essay, Hall notes that Williams “understood the essentially mythic and constructed discourse of ‘essential cultural continuity’”, and quotes from his 1983 essay “Wales and England” where Williams describes the “mongrel mark” of Anglo-Welsh intercultural diffusion. Williams, Hall notes, stresses the “great complexity” at the heart of cultural mixture and exchange, and it is clear that his understanding of ‘identity’ – of the nature of the self that is authored by experience – was not purely the result of a complex process of social class transposition but also of national and cultural identity. “[T]his complex process”, Williams writes, “[...] is in fact always being remade and reinterpreted. [...] It is this mixed and uneven process which is the true and complex cultural identity of Wales [...] and distilling ideal qualities from the forced compound, is not just wrong but hostile” (Williams 2021b [1983]: 64-77).

Kath Woodward (Open University): Revisiting Raymond Williams’ Work in My Life

Kath Woodward is emeritus professor of sociology at the Open University. Her research centres on the sociology of gender and feminist theories and practices and includes work on sports, embodiment and contemporary issues on inequality. Her personal experiences of growing up in Wales and teaching at the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) connect her to Williams and his understanding of culture as a whole way of life.

I first met Raymond Williams’ work through a friend, who gave me *The Long Revolution* at Bristol University in the late 1960s. He also gave me Trotsky’s *Art and Revolution*, which was another mind changing book and related to Williams’ project in many ways - culture matters. Being Welsh, I had heard of Raymond Williams. We are proud of our intellectuals in Wales, but his affiliations with the Marxist left might have been seen as a bit too radical at my girls’ grammar school in Cardiff. Later, I remembered some of our student discussions, especially about class, alienation and most importantly, the problems of deterministic readings of the base superstructure relationship in Marxist thought, and drew extensively on Williams’ arguments about the primacy of culture, in my teaching for the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA). *Culture and Society’s* exploration of the emergence of a particular concept of culture in the Industrial Revolution disrupted conventional understandings of culture through detailed, historical analysis. Williams made sense to me, and his work is accessible to students



coming into higher education because he speaks to the lives of ordinary people. Williams recognised how central culture was to everyone. He puts everyday life and culture and working class lived experience into intellectual life. Although he does not address sexual politics or race and racism directly in his earlier work, Williams provides us with some of the necessary concepts and strategies to critique the impact of culture on everyday practices as well as social institutions.

My eureka moment came when I was working, firstly as a staff tutor in Leeds and then as a central academic in Sociology and Women's Studies at the Open University in the 1990s. I was asked to chair the Identities section of a new, innovative third-level course in Cultural Studies chaired by the wonderful Stuart Hall. "Media, Culture, Identities" used the concept of the circuit of culture to frame the arguments and ideas. It put culture firmly (and interactively and fluidly) into the circuit, which for me legitimised and clarified my understanding of Williams' work. Our explanation of culture drew on Williams' thesis that culture is active and ordinary; we are all implicated in culture and we produce as well as consume it. Culture is "a whole way of life" as well as being more discretely and distinctively the arts and intellectual life. A notion of high and low culture may endure but 'high' culture is a minority pursuit and there are different sorts of culture. I thought of the male voice choirs of the Valleys and my Welsh speaking grandmother's excitement when the *Eisteddfod* was shown on television, in my childhood. As Williams says, there are cultures, rather than a single culture. We had lively course team meetings debating the tensions and dynamics involved in cultural materialism and the ways in which the different moments in the circuit of culture were interrelated and differently inflected. Drawing on Gramsci, another influence on Williams, we interrogated different, widely held common-sense assumptions, for example about sex, gender and sexualities, working practices, racism and racialization as well as popular cultural practices and discourses. Culture was imbricated in social systems and economic and political processes in so many ways. Culture could be invoked and interrogated to explain political shifts like working class espousal of Thatcherism, a phenomenon which Stuart explained with such insight and clarity. For Williams, culture is of intellectual and aesthetic development and an everyday way of life and itself a process. He argues that culture prevents us simply reading off politics from the economic base. You can use these tools now, in trying to make sense of the UK's decision to leave the European Union at the referendum in 2016 and the formerly Labour-voting northern constituencies who voted Tory.

The cultural turn may have been largely abandoned, as not only did Williams develop his original thesis to include changing political concerns of environmentalism and sexual politics, but I have also found it productive to revisit Williams in addressing some of the excesses of postmodernism with its denial of materialism and anything



which could be construed as reality. Culture and representation are not distinct from reality; they are constitutive of it just as the material base generates different cultures.

Kirsti Bohata (Swansea University): Williams and Rural Change

Kirsti Bohata is Professor of English Literature at Swansea University. She recently presented at “The Centenary Symposia: Raymond Williams in an Age of Globalization” on “Working the Land: Raymond Williams and Environmentalism”, a subject she tells us more about in her reflections below.

I first came across Raymond Williams by way of a remainder bookshop in Carmarthen, a market town in west Wales, in the mid-90s. I was looking at that time, in my late teens or early twenties, for books from or about Wales. Despite the existence of a rich literary tradition in Wales, such books were often hard to find in bookshops (for reasons that would require another article to explain), so I was pleased to see a slim volume called *The People of the Black Mountains* (1989) by Raymond Williams. I confess I was not immediately captivated, and did not finish the novel until much later. Yet the opening, with the search for the grandfather, the shape of a hand – a palm and five fingers – and deep time in the geology of place, the traces of human work and life in the landscape, must have made its mark. These scenes stayed with me, though I no longer have the book.

Later, over the years as student then researcher and teacher, a host of received assumptions about culture (as ordinary) and cultural materialism have been a constant though not always conscious presence. Raymond Williams’ Welsh essays and lectures, particularly “The Welsh Industrial Novel” (1978/9) became important in teaching Welsh writing in English at university: though, like much of his work, that essay is wanting in its direct analysis of gender and women’s writing. Given Anglophone Welsh literature, as an academic field of study, barely existed when he wrote the lecture, his ignorance of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century women writers who began to craft some of the tropes and concerns which would occupy working-class men over the coming decades is excusable. His blindness to Kate Roberts and his contemporary Menna Gallie is more surprising.

I returned more deliberately to Raymond Williams this year, pursuing an interest in the rural as a place of work and human connection: the “hills soaked with labour” (2021a [1975]: 53) as he puts it in one essay and, ironically, what Williams had been partly exploring in *People of the Black Mountains* (cf. 1989e). I had been invited by Peak, a community arts group located in the Black Mountains, to consider the question, in his centenary year: ‘what does Williams have to say to us now?’ and I took part in a series of



reading groups, entitled ‘Walking Backwards into the Future’ (“Comisiynau | Commissions” 2021). Following up my own activist (rather than academic) interest in climate change, biodiversity and agriculture (Bohata 2019), I started to read or re-read Williams’ work on the rural and environmental. I was taken aback at how acute an analysis it still offers in the context of contemporary and increasingly fractious debates around land use and rural change. Williams’ analysis is economic and environmental, but first and foremost cultural.

In “Between Country and City” (1984), Williams returns to the analyses offered a decade before in *The Country and the City* (1973). From his home in the Black Mountains, he enumerates what remain key issues in understanding and evaluating rural change: agricultural finance, the unsustainability of ‘high-input agriculture’, divisions between rentiers and those whose ‘first livelihood’ is in the country, the differing perspectives of those who ‘withdraw’ to the countryside and those who are producers (Williams 1989a [1984]: 228-29). He also identifies a ‘return’ to a more diverse rural economy and the potential of a new localism. His proposal that we adopt a new measure of “efficiency [as] the production of a stable economy, an equitable society and a fertile world” (Williams 1989a [1984]: 233) anticipates the rubric of ‘climate justice’. While in “Socialism and Ecology” (1982) the recognition that attitudes of “mastering and conquering” (1989d [1982]: 214) underpin both colonialism and an extractive approach to natural ‘resources’ are in keeping with (particularly feminist) critiques of the concept of the Anthropocene.

There are, inevitably, lacunae in Williams’ analyses that require one to look elsewhere to supplement or modify his arguments. In a Welsh context, Williams’ relative silence on *Cymraeg* (the Welsh language) is a drawback. Locating the anecdotal sketch of rural change in a long-Anglicised area of the Black Mountains in “Between Country and City”, results in his overlooking the fraught politics of language and cultural sustainability which are central to Welsh discourse and lived experience in many parts of rural Wales. This is not to deny Williams has written warm words about the importance of the language and the cultural violence which fuelled its demise:

Here is a language spoken and written since the sixth century, still native language for a significant minority, and to want to keep it [...] is [...] as natural as breathing. [...] It was [along with demographic change] driven back by conscious repression, by penalty and contempt [...] (Williams 2021a [1975]: 7)

But he admits this knowledge has come ‘late’, and in general his critical work overlooks British multilingualism.

Yet this sketch of Williams’ thinking is only part of the picture: if we turn to his fiction, we find a more complex or perhaps complementary picture. *Border Country* (1960), as Daniel G. Williams has argued, reveals an ambivalent and suggestive



relationship with *Cymraeg* (2015: 100-101). In the novel, the young Will recites a poem in *Cymraeg* at an *eisteddfod* (a cultural festival). The prize he wins for his performance he flings into a river. Will/Matthew is similarly ambivalent about the power of Welsh choral singing which threatens to overwhelm his reason and intellect. This powerful emotional and unresolved relationship with *Cymraeg* resonates with wider language politics and the experiences of non-Welsh speakers in Wales. In his fiction, then, we find a treatment of bilingual Wales and second-language encounters with *Cymraeg* which goes beyond what Williams provides in his theoretical work.

Reading Williams' fiction and theory *together* was the approach we adopted in the reading group I ran for Peak, which looked at "Between Country and City" alongside articles about farming as environmental vandalism, rewilding as ecolonialism which would wipe out Welsh-speaking rural communities, and ecofeminist approaches to imperialism and ecocide. Alongside these articles, we read two short paragraphs from *Border Country* which perform something that theory and debate find difficult: representing the duality or multiplicity of meanings of land and landscape.

The literature doesn't provide a solution to the sometimes irreconcilable arguments about land use in Wales or elsewhere, but it offers a way of framing the debate that allows for multiplicity and indeed conflict. Williams' descriptions of the land as "a valley that people were using" (2005 [1960]: 89), with its unsightly marks of human occupation and work, registers the human networks that make up a place, it registers linguistic shifts through the farm and family names in *Cymraeg* and English, it reads the human history within topography, the way nature and wild creatures are pushed to the margins, how roads and rail connect the rural in very different ways with centres of industry and commerce. The fiction invites us to see the human and environmental and historical connections we have with place, but most of all it shows us that we see, and often speak, these places differently. Matthew realises he has been picturing the valley as a static landscape from a guide book, forgetting the valley as a place which holds a working community.

My scholarly interest in the question of rural change, farming and the climate and biodiversity crisis is still in its early days. A new group (which will hopefully become a formal network and perhaps more than one research team) meets in January 2022 to look at 'Narrating Rural Change' in Wales with particular reference to farming and ecological/re-wilding debates. I expect Raymond Williams will be an important presence in those discussions.



Victoria Allen (CAU Kiel): Outlook on Women Working with Williams

What struck me from the correspondence with the contributors is that, indeed, Williams' work continues to have relevance in the current academic discourse. We only have to find the right balance between historically contextualising his work and, instead of glorifying him in his centenary year, constructively engaging with his thoughts. This, in turn, allows a sharing of the work of the people that have further developed Williams' initial ideas for today's contexts and situations.

The responses further illustrated how Williams' influence reaches into our research, writing and teaching, and how it often resonates on a personal level. More than the sense of connectedness to Wales and 'Welshness', it is his insistence that "culture is ordinary" that we see being frequently used as an anchor, as the above reflections have shown. It is this approachable and inclusive understanding of culture that Williams eloquently and vividly conveys in his own personal account of travelling down the valley of the Welsh Black Mountains, which can be read pedagogically as a study in culture and materialism. Sharing and reflecting his biographical (personal) background and connecting it to his work is something that gladdened me, since for me, this exercise is also a step towards attaining a possible "situated[ness]" of our knowledge, to cite Donna Haraway's (2013) manifesto.

Therefore, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the contributors who took their time to send their reflections and dared to share their experiences in this format. More than confirming that, indeed, Williams' work was also relevant to women academics, their openness in responding helped me to assuage my own 'crisis'. Understood as a turning point, or point of departure, their collaboration helped me in my editorial quest of showcasing some of the work of women (in academia) on Williams, providing insight into the different aspects that are drawn from his corpus of work. Accordingly, I hope this collaborative experience can contribute towards creating a platform for future voices to be read and heard, and connected in the mutual project of taking Williams' words forward into a second century.

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