

# Introduction: Reading Raymond Williams in Aotearoa

SHINTARO KONO, DOUGAL McNEILL, ALISTAIR MURRAY

“Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact.”<sup>1</sup> Williams’s famous phrase may, in the hands of his latter-day epigones in a depoliticised institutional Cultural Studies, have been turned towards justifications for the study of and accommodation to what *is*, but, in its originating New Left moment, this was always an assertion of what *might be*. Ordinary culture, and the cultures of ordinary people, were conceived, by Williams and his collaborators, as part of “a genuine revolution, transforming [people] and institutions; continually extended and deepened by the actions of millions, continually and variously opposed by explicit reaction and by the pressure of habitual forms and ideas.”<sup>2</sup> Williams wrote, thought, and organised across his varied career as a socialist intellectual and activist, offering resources of hope and strategic reflections on how cultural work might contribute to the anti-capitalist project of working-class self-organisation and social transformation. That project, difficult enough in the post-war period of his own life and all the more urgent and complex in its conception in our own, the era of Trumpian reaction and ecological collapse, demanded that committed intellectuals parse the “dominant” culture—the culture of capital—for signs of the “emergent,” the collectivity to come, and traces of the “residual,” habits, products and processes from previous class societies carried over into, and deployed, in capitalist cultures.<sup>3</sup> Dominant, residual and emergent were terms Williams used to map the complex and internally contradictory work of culture in class society, and to trace some of its tears, cracks and openings. The vocabulary he bequeathed us, from “structures of feeling” to “long revolution,” has a rich relevance for the rickety and crisis-prone world we find ourselves in now, after the holograms of post-modernism have ceased to be projected but before newly-coherent ruling-class images and narratives have formed. There are signs, in everything from Social Reproduction Theory to the so-called Affective Turn, of a Williams revival amongst committed intellectuals today.<sup>4</sup> Materialist criticism has returned for our bad new days.

But what does it mean to call culture “ordinary” in a white settler colony? A majority culture’s habits of ordinary living and occupation take place on, and in their everyday habits too often erase, indigenous ways of life and intellectual traditions sustained by a minority. Much of what is “ordinary” in te Ao Māori is, for Pākehā sympathetic and unsympathetic alike, *extraordinary*: pōwhiri; cultures of relationship; whānau connections and identification with whenua are all outside of the ways in which everyday Pākehā life is conceived and ordered. Appeals to “ordinary” culture, in a settler-colonial context, too often carry with them assertions of majority, settler habits over minority, indigenous claims. Consider, for example, Don Brash’s rhetorical deployment of the figure of the “ordinary New Zealander” baffled by “race-related consultative nonsense” in his 2004 Orewa speech and elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Does Williams’s work suffer the fate of “travelling theory” in between Britain and white settler-colonial social formations, its democratic and socialist energies transformed in local contexts into something other and altogether less appealing?

The essays collected in this special issue suggest otherwise. Our contributors emphasize an aspect of Williams’s work too often neglected in academic commentary: its emphasis on *social struggle*. Communication, and with it, on occasion, contestation and conflict, within the world of “ordinary” culture is, for Williams, the first fact. What follows is this:

Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment, under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery,

writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. The making of a mind is, first, the slow learning of shapes, purposes and meanings, so that work, observation, and communication are possible. Then, second, but equal in importance, is the testing of these in experience, the making of new observations, comparisons and meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Williams's move is from a restricted and restricting notion of culture as the fine arts of a minority to a more capacious, democratic, expansive sense of the human production of meaning. From that "first fact" comes active debate and amendment. It is in this movement that we see new and potential uses for Williams's work outside of its initial British setting.

"Ordinary" carries with it a complex etymological load. It is, in what is now slightly old-fashioned Australian and New Zealand English usage, a synonym for poor or disappointing: "pretty ordinary behaviour" is of a kind one might feel ashamed of the next morning. *Chamber's Dictionary* gives us "according to the common order or type; usual; of the usual kind; customary; plain; undistinguished; commonplace." The connotations become more negative as the list progresses; an institutional habit following commonly-agreed orders may well be a welcome practice, but who would wish to be remembered for his "plain" or "undistinguished" features? Te reo Māori has no easy equivalent for "ordinary," a word not listed in P. M. Ryan's classic *Dictionary of Modern Māori*, while Moorefield's *Te Aka* gives "noa," too often mistranslated as "ordinary" or "profane," rather than a fuller, and relational, definition, as "an absence of limitations or conditions." The term's English heritage is complex too, and Williams in *Keywords* points out its 400-year history, "without any pejorative sense," of "something done by custom," before eighteenth-century usage introduced "explicit ideas of social superiority and inferiority."<sup>7</sup> Asking how culture might be "ordinary" in a settler-colonial context prompts questions of what ordinariness itself means and might come to mean.

Marxist critics have used the terms residual, dominant, and emergent culture to think through the ways any given moment in a particular social formation contains multiple, competing and sometimes incompatible elements. Feudal remnants are refashioned by the dominant culture of capital as useful costume pieces; collective work and collective forms of expression point to organisation and democracy to come. This future-focused critical work, as with Williams's emphasis on the "ordinary," needs rethinking in a settler-colonial context where indigenous critics and artists, rightly, emphasise connection, sustained practice, journeys forward into the past. Our future, Māori scholars and activists have suggested, is to be found in a connection and transformation of the past: the residual, here, is not something dying away but, rather, a set of resources for new forms of Māori self-expression and community control.<sup>8</sup> Rich currents of Māori Marxism, sustained by activist-intellectuals such as Emmy Rākete, Evan Te Ahu Poata-Smith, and Tama Poata, show how any conception of Utopia—the world to come from the emergent—will need to be the confirmation of what might once have been called the "residual," the resilient and transformative reality of te Ao Māori.<sup>9</sup> Williams, in his own work and example, later in his career, as a "Welsh European," would have recognised much of this and taken inspiration from its growth and development. His terms offer, as the following essays show, tools for investigating local problems.

This collection is intended as a set of prompts for further work and debate. Reading Williams in Aotearoa, our contributors show, can illuminate the local situation in new ways, and the local situation, in turn, can give back unexpected connections and points of argument in the wider international debate amongst socialist intellectuals following in Williams's tradition. We have tried to keep both the local experience and the internationalist theory in useful relation, avoiding both the provincial smugness of anti-theoreticism and the cringing false cosmopolitanism of contextless vapidness. These are interventions speaking to and from a

particular social formation and to its particular problems, but with, we hope, a purchase elsewhere.

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“Elsewhere,” in this collection, had a particular location. This special issue collects together essays first delivered as papers to the conference *Selective Tradition in the Pacific*, held at Victoria University of Wellington from the 1st to the 2nd of September, 2017. The conference was co-hosted by the Raymond Williams Society of Japan and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Victoria University, and brought together over a dozen Japanese scholars alongside researchers, novelists and students from Australia and New Zealand. The Raymond Williams Society of Japan has, over the past decade, pioneered readings of Williams in non-Eurocentric and multi-lingual literary and political settings, and its members brought to the conference a set of assumptions and questions generative of the different kinds of “ordinary” culture and “residual-emergent” cultural strategies you will find in the following essays.

The conference was a special event for all of us, professionally and personally, in the warmth and solidarity it fostered amongst its participants. We tried to enact Williams’s vision of culture by bringing together writers as well as critics and students; all of the essays published here have been through the journal’s standard peer-review process, to be sure, but the peers, and the process, for our novelist contributors reflect their different perspectives, tasks, and creative insights. Not all of the papers presented at the conference could, alas, be published here: Tuioleloto Laura Toailoa spoke movingly on the legacy of our late colleague Teresia Teaiwa, and offered fascinating insights on the ways Pasifika intellectuals might negotiate the burdens of representation; Arini Loader gave a thrilling account of the value of an expanded conception of literacy for understanding Māori writing; and Rangimoana Taylor confirmed his status as New Zealand’s pre-eminent storyteller with an evening of narrative performance. Readers can seek out this issue’s companion publications, *Raymond Williams Kenkyu* and *Correspondence*, for articles by Raymond Williams Society members first presented at the conference and exploring non-New Zealand topics.<sup>10</sup>

The following articles show something of the range of possibilities Williams’s work generates. Jenny Lawn opens with a synoptic literary-political account of literary politics in New Zealand through the neoliberal era. Chris Brickell and Guy Davidson follow with essays blending archival and historical research with literary criticism, excavating some possibilities in “residual” and “emergent” sexual dissidence and gay identities from the pre-1986 world. Alistair Murray takes another queer narrative and another archive, Annamarie Jagose’s *Slow Water*, and reads for utopian possibility in some unexpected textual spaces. Finally, Tina Makereti and Pip Adam offer us reflections as practitioners and working novelists both active in creating “emergent” cultures against the pressures of the present.

Our thanks to all of our contributors, and to everyone who took part in *Selective Tradition in the Pacific*. We are happy to acknowledge here the support of a Kakenhi grant from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, and the funding and generosity of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington.

Associate Professor Teresia Teaiwa (1968–2017) had agreed, during the initial stages of planning the Raymond Williams Society conference, to be one of its keynote speakers. Our work collectively drew on and benefited from her own scholarship, and from her ongoing and critical conversation with Marxism. This issue of the *Journal of New Zealand Studies* is dedicated to her memory, and to the memory of our colleague Dr Fujio Kano.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” in *Conviction*, ed. Norman MacKenzie (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1958), 75.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1961), 10.

<sup>3</sup> See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121–28.

<sup>4</sup> See, *inter alia*, Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory* (London: Pluto, 2016), an exhilaratingly revisionist socialist-feminist text studded with Williams references and asides; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), chapter two; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), and Jennifer Lawn, *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition in New Zealand 1984–2008: Market Fictions* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016). An extended review of Lawn’s text by Shintaro Kono will appear in the next issue of this journal.

<sup>5</sup> Don Brash, “We are all New Zealanders,” *National Business Review*, 29 August, 2005, <https://www.nbr.co.nz/article/text-don-brash-speech-we-are-all-new-zealanders>

<sup>6</sup> “Culture is Ordinary,” 75.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, 2nd ed. (London: Fontana, 1983), 225.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Te Punga Somerville’s work in *Once Were Pacific: Māori Connections to Oceania* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) is an essential point of reference.

<sup>9</sup> See Tama Poata, *Poata: Seeing Beyond the Horizon* (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2012); Evan Te Ahu Poata-Smith, “Māori: Enduring Inequalities,” in *Inequality: a New Zealand Crisis*, ed. Max Rashbrooke (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2013); and “No Pride in Prisons on Abolitionist Politics,” *Counterfutures* 3 (2017): 129–48.

<sup>10</sup> *Raymond Williams Kenkyu* is the publication of the Raymond Williams Society of Japan. *Correspondence* is published by the Graduate School of Language and Society, Hitotsubashi University.