

1-1-2012

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10.1080/09502386.2012.707221

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of: Giblett, R. J. (2012). Nature is Ordinary Too: Raymond Williams as the Founder of Ecocultural Studies. *Cultural Studies*, 26(6), 922-933. Available [here](#)

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Nature is Ordinary Too: Raymond Williams as the Founder of Ecocultural Studies Rod Giblett

In a recent article in the journal *Cultural Studies*, Jennifer Daryl Slack (2008) called for the jettisoning of ecocultural studies as an add-on to Cultural Studies and the revitalizing of Cultural Studies with the eco as integral to it. One way I propose of doing so in this chapter is to revalue and re-establish the beginnings of Cultural Studies, and of ecocultural studies, in the work of Raymond Williams in which both were integral to the other. I call Williams both *a* founder of Cultural Studies and *the* founder of ecocriticism and ecocultural studies, though of course he did not use these terms, nor make these distinctions between them, but that is the point. Williams is exemplary in this respect in that he just got on and did the eco and this is no more the case than in his development of the concept of livelihood sadly missing from the glossaries of Cultural Studies' terms. This chapter traces the development of the concepts of culture, nature, landscape and livelihood in Williams' work. It argues that livelihood deconstructs the culture/nature binary and decolonizes the commodification and aestheticization of land as landscape. It reinstates nature as ordinary, as the stuff of work and everyday life. Nature, like culture for Williams, is ordinary too.

The air we humans breathe and the water we drink comes from an air-shed and watershed; the food we eat is grown in a bioregion; the place in which we live is a watershed and a bioregion inhabited by other beings besides humans; the land we live on and the space we occupy are earthly; the materials our dwellings are made of are based on, or derived from, the earth; the economies in which we buy and sell, trade and invest, have an environmental foundation; the cultures which we create and in which we create art, artifacts, technologies, texts and images utilize, represent, modify and depend upon the earth (both land and the planet). These facets of an air-shed, watershed, bioregion, beings, places, spaces, materials, and the earth collectively conceptualize what used to be, or still could be called, nature. They suggest that nature is ordinary, the stuff of work and everyday life. Yet despite the vital importance of nature to culture, the relationships between Cultural Studies and natural history, the humanities and the sciences have been fraught with misunderstanding, if not suspicion and downright hostility. The sciences have colonized nature and they do not want their colony of nature to be decolonized by ecoculturalists. These relationships have been no more fractious than within Cultural Studies, in particular with the patchy uptake of, or resistance to, 'ecocultural studies,' both within Cultural Studies (with some notable exceptions) and more broadly.

Rather than countering this resistance, Slack (2008) in her recent article in *Cultural Studies* called for the jettisoning of ecocultural studies as an add-on to Cultural Studies and the revitalizing of Cultural Studies with the eco as integral to it. By doing so, she followed in the footsteps of groundbreaking work, including some of her own, in Cultural Studies, and in the journal *Cultural Studies*, that places the natural and environmental front and center to its project. In 1994 Slack and Jody Berland co-edited a special section of *Cultural Studies* on "Cultural Studies and the Environment" (see Slack and Berland 1994). This special section was dedicated *in memoriam* to Alexander Wilson whose *The Culture of Nature* is a pioneering ecocultural study (Wilson 1992). The special section also included McKenzie Wark's influential essay "Third Nature." Both Wilson's and Wark's work have since been taken up, elaborated and critiqued by others (see Giblett 2011, chapter 1). In the same year as the special section in *Cultural Studies*, David McKie edited a special "Environment Issue" of the *Australian Journal of Communication* (see McKie 1994).

The tradition of special issues of journals devoted to the intersections of cultural, communication and environmental studies has been flourishing since 1994. Slack's 2008 article was part of a special issue of *Cultural Studies* that revisited "Cultural Studies and Environment." In the same year a special

issue of *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* was devoted to “Environmental Sustainability” (see Giblett and Lester 2008). The tradition was kept alive in the following year with the publication of a special issue of *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* devoted to “Nature Matters” edited by Cate Mortimer-Sandilands (see Mortimer-Sandilands 2009). In the following year she co-edited with Bruce Erickson the anthology, *Queer Ecologies*, one of the most talked about volumes of ecocriticism right now (see Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010).

Despite this flurry of special issues published by some major journals over the past 20 years and other work devoted to ecocultural studies, the ecological has remained marginal to Cultural Studies, a fact Slack (2008) not only notes and bemoans but also responds to by calling for the jettisoning of ecocultural studies as an add-on to Cultural Studies and the revitalizing of Cultural Studies with the eco as integral to it. One way I propose of doing so in this chapter is to revalue and re-establish the beginnings of Cultural Studies, and of ecocultural studies, in the work of Raymond Williams in which both were integral to the other. I call Williams both *a* founder of Cultural Studies and *the* founder of ecocriticism and ecocultural studies, though of course he did not use these terms, nor make these distinctions between them, but that is the point. Williams is exemplary in this respect in that he just got on and did the eco and this is no more the case than in his development of the concept of livelihood.

By returning to the work of Williams, nature and the ecological, rather than being late ‘add-ons’ to Cultural Studies, can be seen as integral to the early history of Cultural Studies and understood as integral to its ongoing development. Retracing the development of Williams’ work to which nature, landscape, the ecological and livelihood were integral demonstrates that they are integral to the genealogy of Cultural Studies, though they are not often acknowledged as such. I follow Slack (2008) in shifting away from the hyphenated orthographic convention of ‘eco-cultural studies’ in which ‘eco’ does function as a qualifying add-on to Cultural Studies and in which the hyphen functions as a passage from the former to the latter, and shifting to the orthographic convention of ecocultural studies in which the eco is an equal partner with the cultural, in which they are integral to each other and in which they engage in mutual dialogue with each other as they did for Williams.

The integral role of nature to the development of Cultural Studies is particularly evident in Williams’ discussion of the politics and aesthetics of landscape in *The Country and the City*, arguably his best book and the foundational text of ecocriticism. *The Country and the City* is usually categorized as a work of literary criticism and not of Cultural Studies (and so not discussed in the standard books on Cultural Studies). Yet this is to make an artificial and dubious distinction that is not present in Williams’ own work, though of course neither Cultural Studies nor ecocriticism existed as terms in 1973 when the book was first published. But this is precisely the point: to categorize *The Country and the City* as literary criticism is to ignore Williams’ overall cultural project and the integral role of the natural and ecological to it. The natural and ecological component of Williams’ cultural project culminates in the essays he wrote in the last years of his life and his last book, *Towards 2000*, in both of which he developed the concept of livelihood. This concept is an effective way of overcoming the nature/culture split, but it is not one that is included in any of the glossaries of Cultural Studies’ key concepts.

Culture and Nature as Ordinary

Certainly Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* first published in 1957 is a foundational text of Cultural Studies (as Slack (2008) points out) with its emphasis on culture as “lived experience.” In the following year in two landmark texts, both the article, “Culture is Ordinary,” and the book, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, Raymond Williams (1958a) seemed to elaborate on Hoggart when he defined culture as “a whole way of life.” These are also foundational texts of Cultural Studies. Williams does not discuss nature per se in either text. Indeed, ‘Nature’ is not in ‘Index B’ of ‘Words, Themes and Persons’ in *Culture and Society*. Thus it is a term that was not present at the birth of Cultural Studies in the late 1950s. Yet culture defined as “a whole way of life” includes the concept of nature as a cultural construction, nature as the biological processes that make life and culture possible, and the natural as a surface of inscription for the cultural.

And indeed the natural is implicit precisely in the terms of the latter for although nature per se is not mentioned in ‘Culture is Ordinary,’ Williams (1958b, 5) relates how “I had come from a country with twenty centuries of history written visibly into the earth.” Two aspects are important here. One is the fact that the cultural act of history writing into the earth figures the natural as surface of inscription. The trope of history writing visibly into the earth was developed by Williams himself and by others with the surface of the earth seen as a surface of inscription for cities with its grid of streets and lots written into the earth and for communication technologies, such as railways and telegraphy, writing on lines (railway lines, telegraph lines) on the surface of the earth. In *Postmodern Wetlands* (Giblett 1996)

I consider the city as written on the surface of the earth and in *Sublime Communication Technologies* (Giblett 2008) I consider the railway and telegraph as written on the surface of the earth and draw on Williams' work on communication and its technologies and produce an environmental history and ecocultural study of communication technologies.

The other important aspect here is that Williams himself notes in more than one of his books that his background growing up in coal country had a fundamental influence on his approach to Cultural Studies. This sense of not only having come from a country, perhaps referring generally to Britain, or to Wales, with twenty centuries of history written visibly into the earth, but also having come from coal country in Wales with this history written into the earth and the bodies of its inhabitants is central to Williams' life and politics. Of Welsh miners Williams (1989, 220) said that "it is no use simply saying to them that all around them is an ecological disaster. They already know. They live in it. They have lived in it for generations. They carry it in their lungs." My favorite anecdote about Williams is that during the Welsh miners' strike of 1974 he helped to deliver soup to the striking miners. This public act of solidarity by a Cambridge Professor demonstrates a profound commitment to the politics of people and place that exemplifies his thinking about ecology and livelihood. Williams' regard for miners and his work on ecology and livelihood has been taken up recently and applied by others to minecapes and the inhabitants of mining towns (see Giblett 2009, especially 140).

Following on from the absence of the concept of nature from Williams' early work and from the birth of Cultural Studies, it took about a decade for nature to explicitly join the party and to participate in the development of Cultural Studies. In 1972 Williams (1972, 146–164) devoted an article to tracing the history of "Ideas of Nature" and in 1976 published his discussion of 'nature' in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* in which he famously argued that "nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language" (1976, 184). In writing an overture to the special issue of *Cultural Studies* in which Slack's recent article appears and in mapping the field of ecocultural studies, Phraeda Pezzullo (2008) invokes Williams in her title and discusses his work on the concept of nature (but not his other work on landscape, livelihood and ecology). In *Keywords* Williams also argued that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (1976, 76), so it is right up there with nature for Williams. "Ideas of Nature" and the *Keywords* entry on 'Nature' are arguably foundational texts of ecocultural studies, as are Williams' late publications of the last years of his life, such as the book *Towards 2000* (1983) and the essays, "Socialism and Ecology" (1982) and "Between City and Country" (1984), both collected in *Resources of Hope*.

"Between City and Country" harks back, as the title suggests, to Williams' landmark 1973 book *The Country and the City*, arguably the foundational text of ecocriticism as Williams gave an ecological reading of much of the English literary canon. Although Williams had second thoughts later in his life and preferred the concept of livelihood, the crucial distinction for him in *The Country and the City* is not between culture and nature, but between the country and the city, and within the country between "unmediated nature" ("a physical awareness of trees, birds, the moving shapes of land" (though I would suggest that this already smacks of the natural historian's abstraction of species from their habitats and ecosystems and the explorer's doctrine of *terra nullius* that denies the work of indigenes in shaping the country and nature)) and "working agriculture" ("in which much of the nature is in fact being produced") (Williams 1973, 118 and 119). Or perhaps more precisely, I would specify re-produced. The country was constructed in the service of a bourgeois, and burgeoning, agrarian and industrial capitalism. Indeed, Williams (1973, 118) shows how the strongest feeling for the aesthetic and other pleasures of nature in the country were evinced precisely when agrarian and industrial capitalism were making their strongest and most irreversible inroads into re-shaping the countryside. At the same moment and, indeed, in the same breath and stroke of the brush and pen, as nature was being aestheticized, nature was also being exploited economically by hand, tool and machine. Aestheticization was a compensatory and disavowing device for commodification.

Although agrarian capitalism was not responsible for the invention of nature, I would suggest that it was complicit with the scientificization of nature and it did heighten and extend a process instituted by agriculture. "The real invention of the landlords," as Williams (1973, 124) calls it, was "to make Nature move to an arranged design." The category of country was constructed by an emergent landed gentry and entrepreneurial capitalist class as a means of securing and maintaining its hegemony through the control of land as its resource base. Country was a cultural construction of nature. Williams' history attests to the rise of this ideology of nature, this capitalist construction of the categories of landscape and nature, which was simultaneous and concomitant with the capitalist exploitation of the land. For Williams (1973, 120) "a working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation." Landscape is primarily an aesthetic, rather than a land-use, category, a visual experience for the roaming eye/I which/who occasionally stops to take in the pleasing, picturesque prospect from a static viewpoint.

The development of industrial technology and its agricultural application was a crucial watershed in changing the face (and body), the appearance and processes, the surfaces and depths of the land as Williams (1973, 122–123) argues:

when men could produce their own nature, both by the physical means of improvement (earth–moving with new machines; draining and irrigation; pumping water to elevated sites) and by the understanding of the physical laws of light and thence of artificial viewpoints and perspectives, there was bound to be a change from the limited and conventionally symbolic and iconographic decoration of the land under immediate view.

Yet it was not just ‘men’ in a general, generic sense, nor even the gender as a whole, but a specific class of the gender who called themselves ‘the Improvers,’ or what Williams calls the agrarian capitalists, who produced (their own) nature from their own point of view as Williams (1973, 123) goes on to argue: “for what was being done, by this new class, with new capital, new equipment and new skills to hire, was indeed a disposition of ‘Nature’ to their own point of view.” By dispositioning nature according to their own point of view, nature is constituted as the ordinary stuff of work and everyday life.

Williams (1973, 115) argues that this arranging of nature for economic and aesthetic ends can be found in Jane Austen’s novels in general in which “the land is seen primarily as an index of revenue and position; its visible order and control are a valued product, while the process of working it is hardly seen at all,” if at all! The annual incomes of Austen’s landed gentry are produced by the earthly foundation to the economic base, but this relationship is figured in indexical, not ecological, terms. Money equals land. Land has value only insofar as it can be equated with monetary value. It has no value in its own right; it has value only as a source of monetary value, as the site of production. Austen’s novels are the culmination of a tradition in which Williams (1973, 125) what calls “a rural [though hardly even that in the sense of agricultural as it is a country] landscape emptied of rural labor and of laborers [becomes] a sylvan and watery prospect.” The ‘prospect’ that Elizabeth Bennet enjoys in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the ‘pleasing prospects’ that Williams (1973, 121) discusses in chapter 12 of *The Country and the City* of that title with its “characteristic eighteenth century [...] double meaning’ divided into ‘practical’ and ‘aesthetic.’” The term also has a double spatial and temporal meaning: it implies both the landscape and the future lying before one that could either be pleasing or displeasing. The pleasing prospect is wooded and watery, timbered and riverine, not marshy or swampy; it is dryland, not wetland.

The agrarian capitalists for Williams dispositioned nature by improvements both in ‘working agriculture’ and in ‘artificial landscapes.’ Austen reinforces both aspects in her novels in general as Williams (1973, 115) suggests and in *Pride and Prejudice* in particular. Both impulses are capitalist for, in working agriculture as Williams (1973, 124) puts it, “the land is being organized for production” whilst in the worked, aestheticized landscape the land is being “organized for consumption.” The aim of the agrarian capitalists was “to arrange and rearrange nature according to a point of view,” “to make Nature move to an arranged design” as Williams (1973, 123–124) goes on to argue in both the worked and consumed aesthetic landscape and the working and producing agricultural land. Nature is ordinary as the stuff of work and everyday life.

The pleasing prospect and picturesque landscape is not what Williams (1973, 3 and 118) calls “an unmediated nature: a direct and physical awareness of trees, birds, the moving shapes of land,” nor is it “working agriculture in which much of the nature is in fact being produced.” It is mediated nature, nature produced as an object for aesthetic consumption. Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is only aware of the wood, not of trees, let alone birds; she cannot see the trees for the wood! In and over the landscape nothing moves except the eye of the viewer. The land does not move; the land is passive; the land is rendered motionless and timeless, locked into pleasing prospects and pleasant shapes as it is also in the moving pictures of television, such as in the BBC series of *Pride and Prejudice* which reduces the novel to romance fiction and neglects its class and landscape politics. Williams’ pioneering work on landscape, especially his account of ‘pleasing prospects’ in *The Country and the City* (Williams 1973, 120–126), has been taken up and elaborated recently by others (see Giblett 2011, chapter 4).

Livelihood

During the 1980s Williams developed the concept of ‘livelihood’ in the essays and book he published in the last years of his life. For Williams livelihood is both cultural and natural. Livelihood decolonizes the oppression of the natural environment. Livelihood implies both one’s work and one’s physical surrounds, their environmental supports and effects, as well as something like the American concept of

a bioregion, one's geomorphological and biological region, the watershed, the valley, the plain, the wetland, the aquifer, etc. where or on which one lives and works, and which sustains one's life, the lives of indigenes before one and still does so now in places (not to forget the resource regions exploited elsewhere) and the life of other species of fauna as well as flora, and on which one impacts environmentally.

'Livelihood' for Williams is a concept and practice that cuts across the rural/country (though these cannot be simply equated as Williams argues), the capital/city, and nature/ culture distinctions and divisions. Livelihood deconstructs the culture/nature binary by showing how the relationship between them is hierarchical with the former privileged over the latter. Culture is valorized over nature in culturalism and nature is denied and repressed; nature is exploited and oppressed in and by capitalism and nation-states. The valorization of nature in naturalism is merely the flip side and reactionary mirror image of culturalism. For the distinction to be made between culture and nature and the relationship between them to be established a third party and term had to be excluded. The excluded third between culture and nature is livelihood. Livelihood is both cultural and natural. There is no livelihood that is not both cultural and natural. Livelihood is cultural and natural.

The concept and practice of livelihood enabled Williams to rethink ecology along similar lines, in a similar time, to Felix Guattari (1989) who critiqued the ecology of a small minority of nature lovers or accredited experts and called for a third, generalized ecology that "questions the whole of subjectivity and capitalist power formations." For Williams (1985, 214-215; see also 1982, 210-226):

what is now known as the ecological argument should not be reduced to its important minor forms; the dangerously rising scale of industrial and chemical pollution; the destruction of some natural habitats and species. The case of the argument is very much harder [...] What is really at issue is a version of the earth and its life forms as extractable and consumable wealth. What is seen is not the sources and resources of many forms of life but everything, including people, as available raw material, to be appropriated and transformed. Against this, the ecological argument has shown, in case after case, and then as a different way of seeing the whole, that a complex physical and its intricately interacting biological process cannot for long be treated in such ways, without grave and unforeseen kinds of damage.

For Williams the only way to mount a revolution against the capitalist conquest and mastery of nature is to produce "a new social and natural order" via the concept and practice of 'livelihood.' Williams (1984, 237; see also 1985, 266-267) warns that:

the deepest problems we have now to understand and resolve are in [the] real relations of nature and livelihood [...] [T]he central change we have to make is in the received and dominant concept of the earth and its life forms as raw material for generalized production [...] [In order to do so] it is important to avoid a crude contrast between 'nature' and production,' and to seek the practical terms of the idea which would supersede both: the idea of 'livelihood,' within, and yet active within, a better understood physical world and all truly necessary physical processes. Both industrial and agrarian capitalism have overridden this idea of livelihood, putting generalized production and profit above it.

The country is not the last bastion of nature against exploitation by capitalism, nor the final refuge of nature in flight from capitalism, but its happy hunting (and gathering, and farming) ground in agrarian and industrial capitalism. Industrial capitalism was and still is just as active in and with the country as it was and is in and with the city.

Livelihood decolonizes the distinction between culture and nature, and the unsustainable exploitation of the country by the city and of nature by capitalism. Capitalism is intimately tied up with 'capital-ism,' the fixation on and privileging of the capital city, whether it be of the nation, state or province, over the margins, outskirts and outlying regions. Livelihood empowers the country to resist its exploitation and oppression by the city through creating a sense of place and a viable local economy based on local produce and local markets. As such, livelihood should be a keyword in the vocabulary of culture and society, a key concept in Cultural Studies, and in the books devoted to these concepts and words. At present it is not.

Learning Lessons from Williams' Work

Livelihood is also absent from some of Williams' own late work in which one might have expected to find it. For instance, in *The Politics of Modernism* (1989), one of the posthumously published collections of his essays, he discusses the future of Cultural Studies and the uses of cultural theory in essays of these titles without mentioning ecology or livelihood. This is perplexing as surely one of the

futures of Cultural Studies lies in ecology and ‘the environment’; surely one of the uses of cultural theory is to apply it to ecological and environmental issues. Although livelihood and ecology drop from view in this posthumously published collection of essays and articles, they do not from the other, *Resources of Hope* where they are prominent in the two essays, “Socialism and Ecology” (1982) and “Between City and Country” (1984). This editorial separation bifurcates the ecological and the political from the cultural and theoretical in ways in which they were not separate for Williams and for whom they were integral to each other (despite the perplexing lapses mentioned), and should be to Cultural Studies. Developing and deploying livelihood is one of a number of what Williams called “resources for a journey of hope.” Another ‘resource of hope’ for Williams is a strong attachment to place stemming from his own attachment to coal country. Both of these, and other, resources of hope have been taken up and elaborated upon in recent work in ecocultural studies (see Giblett 2009, 139-146).

The secondary status of nature and the ecological is evident not only in one of Williams’ posthumous collections but also in the secondary literature on Williams’ life and work. Fred Inglis (1995, 14), for example, only mentions the green Williams once at the beginning of his study when he largely dismisses this aspect of his work in his “Prologue” where he condescendingly quotes Williams’ eldest daughter in passing as claiming him at his funeral, “not quite unexpectedly, for green politics, for ecology; for Gaia.” In terms of Williams’ work over at least the last sixteen years of his life, it was entirely apposite and appropriate for her to do so. The intellectual and political sons (including myself) and the biological daughter struggle over the legacy of the father in claiming it for ecology, or socialism, or Cultural Studies, or communication studies, or all four. That his work is engaged in all these fields is its major strength and indicative of his enormous and still pertinent contribution (to all four). When any of these aspects is emphasized or foregrounded at the expense of any of the others, or when one is denigrated in preference to the others (as Inglis does in claiming Williams for Cultural Studies and socialism and dismissing his daughter’s claims on him for ecology and green politics), the overall, multi-faceted nature of Williams’ work in which all of these aspects are integral to the others is diminished. For Williams, the eco is integral to Cultural Studies.

It is also unfortunate that all these aspects of nature, landscape, the ecological and livelihood in Williams’ work disappear from the standard books on Cultural Studies while his work on class, communication, culture and technology does not. This appears to be a manifestation and reinforcement of the ‘two cultures’ split in which nature is assigned to the sciences and culture to the arts and humanities. Williams crossed the great divide, or ‘no-man’s land,’ between the ‘two cultures’ of the humanities and the sciences and delivered a plague on both their houses. As such, he worked in the great tradition of nature writers and environmental philosophers, such as Richard Jefferies and Henry David Thoreau, who did something similar. As such, he not only made a place for Cultural Studies to occupy between the humanities and sciences where perhaps it is shot at, or down, by both sides, but also where he planted a seed of the eco that, rather than growing into a branch of Cultural Studies, has grown into flowers producing new seeds that are planted and grow elsewhere. The whole tree is ecocultural studies. One part cannot survive without the other.

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