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Keywords and Keywording

ABSTRACT

This article pursues two tasks. The first is to clarify the value and productivity of Williams’s *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (first edition 1976, second expanded edition 1983a) for the project of Cultural Studies. This clarification is helped, I argue, by reading it alongside Vološinov’s *Marxism and the philosophy of language* (published in Russian in 1929, translated into English in 1973). The second and related task is a speculative development of ‘keywording’ (or keyword analysis) based on an assessment of the limitations and potential of Williams’s broad philological project for today. My argument is that *Keywords* initially sought to provide a historical map of changing patterns of feeling associated (primarily) with industrialization in England, and that this was sometimes in an uneasy relationship with what he would later name as the project of providing ‘resources of hope’. One consequential limitation of the original work is that its historical perspective was built on semantic examples provided by the *OED* (or to give it its original title, the *Oxford new English dictionary on historical principles*) and supplemented with Williams’s literary studies. My suggestion is that Cultural Studies can develop (and has, to some degree, already developed) Williams’s *Keywords* project without it being centred on literature or beholden to the *OED*. This would mean treating the project less as an exemplary milestone or methodology and more as an unfinished and unfinishable project whose methodology is critically dynamic: in other words, to move from *Keywords* to ‘keywording’ requires altering Williams’s methodology. In conclusion I speculate about the ways in which the historical aims of keywording could be expanded to make it more conducive to providing ‘useable histories’ and semantic counter-narratives, while also pursuing the radical contextualism of Vološinov and Bakhtin.
INTRODUCTION

The idea that some words are ‘keywords’ is a central analytic belief within Cultural Studies. What is less clear is how keywords should be selected, and how analyses should proceed once a selection has been made. Today, for instance, should we treat ‘populism’ as a keyword, and then proceed to find as many instances of its use as possible, looking at word frequency and the pattern of collocated adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and nouns (words found in close proximity, and used to moderate and accentuate the term ‘populism’)? Given the resources of corpus linguistics this might seem to be the most obvious recourse, but how much work does the word ‘populism’ do within populist politics? Might we be better off looking at words that might seem more innocent but end up doing the ideological heavy lifting of populism, words like ‘great’, for instance?

Within Cultural Studies it is the work of Raymond Williams that is most associated with the analysis of a carefully chosen, interlocking vocabulary through which historical transitions can be glimpsed and a changing society mapped via a dynamic history of shifting meanings within this vocabulary. Williams’ *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (first edition 1976, second edition 1983a) provides, in the words of John Durham Peters, a ‘history of words [that] can serve as a kind of geological record of changed structures of feeling’ (Peters 2006, p. 60). In Marie Moran’s words *Keywords* finds in ‘semantic complexity a unique insight into the social changes with which the new and sometimes conflicting uses of the word are bound up’ (Moran 2015, p. 27). What interested Williams is
the way that language, rather than just registering changes in society (after the fact, so to say), is also a scene of transformation and negotiation: ‘it is a central aim of this book [Keywords] to show that some important social and historical processes occur within language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meanings and relationships are’ (Williams 1983a, p. 22).

One of the functions that Williams’s Keywords performs within Cultural Studies is pedagogic. Setting a Keyword entry for a seminar discussion is a way of steering a neophyte Cultural Studies student away from the search for definition and fixity and alerting them to complexity and conflictual meaning. It is a way of attuning students: sensitising them to a Cultural Studies that privileges history over the reifications of the present; orienting them within a field where negotiation and struggle matter more than the surety of an immobile position. But while the field regularly pays homage to Keywords as foundational, my sense is that the practice of ‘keywording’, of undertaking keyword analysis, is not something that we actively promote and teach as a form of historical analysis. There may be, as I will discuss, very good reasons for this, but my ambition within this essay is to encourage a more modest and eccentric practice of pursuing keyword analysis, and as part of this I want to use the gerund form ‘keywording’ to name an approach to keywords that can adopt experimental and transformative approaches to socially semantic histories.

If recent trends in publishing are anything to go by, then it would seem likely that of all Williams’s books Keywords will have the most lasting impact on the general field of the human sciences. A quick online search of books with ‘Keywords’ in the title reveal a slew of recent publications, the majority of which make some claim to be continuing a tradition of semantic investigation inaugurated by (or seen as inaugurated by) Williams’s book. Many of these publications also recognise Keywords as a keywork of Cultural Studies, with some claiming to share this field, while others acknowledging a more distant relation. Here is not
the place to review this work, but it is worth noting a few general areas of difference within ‘keyword publishing’ that could form the basis of a taxonomy for recognising approaches to keywords research. The first aspect to note is that keyword publishing registers extraordinary differences in scale: Digital keywords (Peters 2016) considers twenty-five terms, while Keywords in news and journalism studies (Zelizer and Allan 2010) is composed of 430 entries.¹ The second feature to note is that while some keywords books share the historical orientation of Williams’s work (and Keywords was originally announced under the title Changes in English during the industrial revolution)² others are much more concerned with mapping the vocabulary of the current situation (for example Keywords: the new language of capitalism [Leary 2018]). Another element worth registering is that while a few of these books are the work of a single author (Leary 2018) others are the work of multiple authors over an extended period of time: Keywords for today (MacCabe and Yanacek 2018) and New keywords: A revised vocabulary of culture and society (Bennett, Grossberg, Morris 2005) being major exemplars. Lastly the objectives of the books range from what might be thought of as ‘discipline building’ or ‘discipline consolidating’, to more general philological exegeses of language clusters.

In what follows I revisit Keywords as a project that was dedicated to a socially critical philology, aimed at providing ‘resources of hope’ to those struggling to find ways of not just describing the world as fully as possible, but of making aspects of it newly visible and thereby open to challenge and change. If the project that Williams names as ‘Resources for a journey of hope’ (the final section of Williams 1983b) meant finding new strategic allegiances and alliances in the present for the long ‘progressive’ revolution (however interrupted), then Keywords was more historically determined and often charted the effects of semantic restriction and loss. In revisiting Keywords the work of Vološinov (which had recently been translated into English when Williams was preparing Keywords) provides, I argue, a valuable
perspective for a fuller understanding of aspects of Williams’s project. Yet Williams’s adoption and adaption of the social linguistics of Vološinov is, as I will explain, inevitably only partial. In the final sections of this article I will examine some of the limitations and problematics of Williams’s Keywords and, using the example of the word ‘environment’, speculatively outline ways that it could be developed today as a practice that is better able to register the heteroglot sociality of language as well as the larger arena of communication.

WILLIAMS’S KEYWORDS IN CONTEXT

One way of characterising Williams’s intellectual project is to locate it as part of a tradition of post-WWII Western Marxism. An overarching concerns amongst intellectuals who identified as Marxists but sought to distance themselves from Soviet-style communism (particularly after the Soviet Union’s army brutally crushed the 1956 Hungarian Revolution) was how to maintain the broad explanatory ambition of Marxism, without lapsing into a form of economic determinism or what many termed ‘vulgar Marxism’. What Western Marxism sought was a way of being able to figure and explain the social totality, and to do so by looking at the multiple determinants that were shaping society. Looking across Williams’s oeuvre phrases like ‘[culture as] a whole way of life’, and ‘structures of feeling’ should be recognised as condensed and provisional attempts to use ordinary language to signal a form of complex totality that simultaneously refuses claims of universalism and a simplified understanding of historical determinism. Keywords is one attempt, perhaps Williams’s central attempt, to write a historical totality of Western culture’s ‘long revolution’ (though as he admits his concern was primarily English culture and society) as a complex web of interlocking thoughts and feelings (‘thought as felt and feeling as thought’ [Williams 1977, p.
from the late-eighteenth century to his present day. It is this ambitious historical
enterprise that needs to frame an engagement with *Keywords*.

The ambition for ‘totality’ takes a specific form in Williams’s work as it does in many
other cultural historians and critics writing in the mid-century in Britain. Cultural and social
anthropology, emerging in the wake of E. B. Tylor’s definition of culture in 1871 as ‘that
complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other
capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’ (1903, p. 1), became, I would
argue, the prism through which an idea of totality could be registered as a practical possibility.
The idea of culture as ‘a whole way of life’ has a genetic link to the idea of culture as a
‘complex whole’, although while the anthropologists often sought a functionalist
understanding of totality – ‘totalization without contradictions’ (Anderson 1968, p. 47) –
Williams and others were interested in registering a totality where contradiction, contingency
and conflict are seen as the animating principle of class society. The selection of *Keywords*
weaves a capacious net that can register the totality as a historically mutating network driven
by conflicts, contradictions, struggles, lags, inconsistencies, tensions, histories, communities,
and inequalities.

Across this archival impulse, Williams’s work was motivated by the activist’s desire
to change society. In his extensive interviews with the editors of *New Left Review*, Williams
frames *Keywords* as a resource for working-class organic intellectuals:

I had a very strong sense, as in everything else, that working-class people needed to
command all the tools with which social transactions are conducted. Today, I notice
people using *Keywords* who would not be interested in any of my other books,
because they bump into one of these words and want to look it up. I deliberately
included some terms in it because I felt that people did not know their more interesting
and complex social history, and so were often either unsure about employing them, or recoiling from one of their meanings which had been heavily put by ruling-class papers and publicists. I wanted to give them confidence in their ability to use these terms. (1981, p. 179)⁴

To claw language back from ‘ruling-class papers and publicists’, is a recognition that semantic struggle is always ongoing. It is also to imagine a critical philology that invites the reader to enter the semiotic fray and to find within these semantic histories the tones, orientations and accents that might allow a ‘vocabulary of culture and society’ to become an agent in imagining and realising a better tomorrow.

*Keywords* is a work of erudition, but it is introduced by two anecdotes that place the scene of semantic struggle, not in libraries and literary history, but in day-to-day lived experience and the activities that accompany words. The first anecdote (in the first paragraph of the introduction) has Williams returning to Cambridge University at the end of WWII after four years fighting in the Army and finding that much has changed. He is talking to a political associate who had also just been demobbed from the Army (the historian Eric Hobsbawm)⁵ and they both agree that they have returned to a different world. Looking around at their changed milieu they both say, ‘the fact is, they just don’t speak the same language’ (1983a, p. 11). The second anecdote points to a time six years earlier when Williams first came to Cambridge from a working-class community in Wales and found that he didn’t speak the same language as the new people he was meeting (who today we might call the wealthy elite).⁶ Anyone familiar with Williams’s œuvre, will recognise that this anecdote refers us back to what could be considered the inaugural statement of Williams’s project; the 1958 text ‘Culture is Ordinary’. ‘Culture is Ordinary’ is a theoretically anecdotal text in as much as it theorizes using the concrete material of anecdotal resources. His anecdotes are always loaded.
He remembers going to the University of Cambridge and being told in a lecture that the word ‘neighbour’ no longer meant what it did in Shakespeare’s time, and that ‘today’ (in 1939) it named a physical proximity rather than a sense of the shared belonging and mutual obligation that ‘neighbour’ meant in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. Yet Williams’s reality is that it is this older meaning of neighbour that is alive in his experience of a Welsh working-class community:

> When my father was dying, this year, one man came in and dug his garden; another loaded and delivered a lorry of sleepers for firewood; another came and chopped the sleepers into blocks; another – I don’t know who, it was never said – left a sack of potatoes at the back door; a woman came in and took away a basket of washing. (Williams 1989a, p. 9).

I think it is worth noting two things here. The first is that these anecdotes insist that the semantics of keywords is a matter of social practice and social relations (‘neighbourliness’ is a practice rather than an abstract idea). The second thing to note is that both anecdotes complicate the idea that semantic difference exists either on a synchronic axis (different communities simultaneously use the same word to mean quite different things) or on a diachronic axis (a word has changed meaning over time). The anecdotes speak of semantic clashes where different histories that had been forged *simultaneously* in different places (‘from an artillery regiment on the Kiel Canal to a Cambridge college’, ‘I had come to Cambridge from a working-class family in Wales’ Williams 1983a, p. 11) and come together at the scene of semantic struggle in a specific space – the lecture halls and social spaces of Cambridge.
These anecdotes could be described, in the words of the anthropologist David Pocock, as the scene of ‘anthropological experience’. When Pocock started teaching anthropology at the University of Oxford, national service was still in force: ‘when young men of very different backgrounds were thrown together in the alien world of the armed forces.’ The ‘throwing together’ produced an experience that Pocock wants to name as anthropological:

Few had previously had occasion to move out of their own social environment; for the majority their social experience had been homogenous in the sense that parents, family, friends and school teachers had all shared certain values, all shared, by and large, a common view of the world. I don’t believe that anyone was ignorant of the fact that there are differences within one and the same society; but very few indeed had ever come to intimate terms with such differences: now they experienced the distinction between knowing something and living it. (Pocock 1975, p. 17)

I want to note in passing the use of the words ‘social environment’ in that first sentence, but the larger point is that this sense of the anthropological in the post-1945 period named a form of experiential knowledge that was to be gained ‘in the field’, whether that field was national service, class mobility, or some other ‘cultural clash’. What both Pocock and Williams are alluding to is an impetus that is a foundational move within Cultural Studies: the act of bringing an anthropological optic to bear on your own culture. What characterizes anthropology and distinguishes it from sociology at this point, is the insistence on finding out what culture feels like from the inside, coupled with a sense of the social totality (a whole way of life). As I mentioned above, Keywords was first announced in print in the 1958 foreword to Culture and society (1990), but in that foreword Williams makes clear that the keyword
research into the word ‘culture’ started seriously in 1946. We might also add that the anecdotes suggest that the sort of awakening to critical philology began somewhat earlier in the lecture theatres and tearooms of Cambridge in 1939. Thirty-seven years is quite a gestation period for a book, and I think we are entitled to ask why did *Keywords* only come to publication in 1976? What were the conditions of possibility that existed at that point which made publication not just possible but desirable and something that Williams would find newly worthwhile? On a practical level, it was clear that by the 1970s Williams was a writer who would have found it fairly easy to publish any project that he was working on, so the decision to dust-off the files that he had been keeping for thirty odd years may have seemed opportune. Presumably though this would have been a possibility much earlier. My sense is that Williams was motivated by the recent English-language publication of Vološinov’s *Marxism and the philosophy of language* in 1973. Certainly, Vološinov’s book appears in the bibliography to *Keywords*, and is a central element in the book he published the year after *Keywords*, particularly evident in the chapter on language which is the theoretical core of *Marxism and literature* (1977). When Williams came to reflect on ‘The Uses of Cultural Theory’ towards the end of his life he saw the Vitebsk circle (P. N. Medvedev, V. N. Vološinov, M. M. Bakhtin and others) as the basis and starting point for fashioning useful cultural theory (Williams 1989). Williams has taught us to see any work as complexly determined, requiring an intricate set of conditions to make it possible: the translation of *Marxism and the philosophy of language* is one node in that web of conditions that made *Keywords* not just the much delayed appendix to *Culture and Society*, but a contribution to, and a timely intervention in, a field (Cultural Studies and the humanities more generally) that was often overawed by the formal complexities of structuralist semiotics.¹⁰ Vološinov’s and Bakhtin’s work in the 1920s and 1930s (as well as Bakhtin’s later clarifications) provides a particularly useful position for not just drawing out important aspects of *Keywords* but for
developing new approaches to keywording. Their work allows us to emphatically grasp the social dynamism that was at the heart of Williams’s understanding of the keywords he was uncovering in Culture and Society, as well as to have a sense of limitations of Keywords in relation to the corpora it was based on. Their work, I argue, is fundamental to seeing Keywords as an important phase in Cultural Studies’ commitment to a radically social understanding of language and other conveyors of sense and feeling, and to encouraging work that can extend the corpora that will undergird keywording practices in the future.

THE ROAD FROM VITEBSK TO KEYWORDS

‘The road from Vitebsk’ (Williams 1989b, p. 166) is Williams’s designation for research in art, philosophy, linguistics, and cultural sociology undertaken by a group of Russian scholars meeting in Vitebsk then later Leningrad in the 1920s. Today this group is best known as the Bakhtin Circle, in recognition of the important role played by Mikhail Bakhtin in the thought of the group. For the purpose of this essay I’m going to ignore the analytic differences between the musicologist, poet, composer and linguist Valentin Vološinov (also written as Voloshinov) and the better-known work of Bakhtin, and treat Bakhtin’s subsequent work (particularly ‘Discourse in the novel’) as clarifications and amplifications of the language philosophy established in Vološinov’s Marxism and the philosophy of language, a book described by Fredric Jameson as ‘quite simply one of the best general introduction to linguistic study as a whole’ (Jameson 1974, p. 536).

Vološinov’s approach to language is insistently social and treats the unfixity of signs as the ontological condition of language: it is a word’s ability to be re-directed, re-accentuated, re-oriented that allows it to have a social life and a social history. To make this point more emphatically he calls the semantic dynamism of a word its multiaccentuality –
putting the stress on the socially active process of inflecting, accentuating, and directing words, rather than on the capacity of a single word to hold different and sometimes conflicting meaning (which might be covered by the term polysemy). It is the multiaccentuality of the word that makes the sign ‘an arena of the class struggle’ (Vološinov 1973, p. 23). Words that convey ideas, feelings and values (Vološinov calls these ‘ideological signs’) are sites of contestation, conflict and struggle:

The social multiaccentuality of the ideological sign is a very crucial aspect. By and large, it is thanks to this intersecting of accents that a sign maintains its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development. A sign that has been withdrawn from the pressures of the social struggle – inevitably loses force, degenerating into allegory and becoming the object not of live social intelligibility but of philological comprehension. (p. 23)

But he is also aware that within class society the ruling class use their power (and their newspapers) to try and shut down what his colleague and friend Bakhtin calls heteroglossia: the lively social diversity of meanings and accents. So, ‘ruling-class papers and publicists’ might strive to make a word like ‘democracy’ ‘uniaccentual’ (p. 23): for ‘democracy’ to be uniaccentual the word’s capacity to be accentuated towards different forms of living together and different arrangements for allocating resources would be blocked. If this process were totally successful, the word would be jammed and refer only to a rather motley way of maintaining the status quo through regular events where populations chose between two or more quite similar forms of governance. In this case, to accentuate the word ‘democratic’ to name an everyday practice of equality would appear incoherent. Words can also be ‘bleached’ of meaning: a current example would be the way that the word ‘excellence’ performs in
Higher Education discourse in the UK and elsewhere at present (Allan 2007, Readings 1996). In an essay from 1934-5, ‘Discourse in the Novel’ Bakhtin develops this idea and suggests that all utterances (and an utterance – everything from a grunt to a novel – is the social unit of meaning for both Vološinov and Bakhtin) face ‘centrifugal and centripetal forces’: pure multiaccentuality is as unlikely as total blockage.

The multiaccentuality of the word is what allows it to register both different social interests and values, as well as emphatic and subtle cultural changes. It is this that makes some words keywords in Williams’s sense. Indeed, when Vološinov describes a word’s ability to register social change he could almost be writing a condensed overview of

*Keywords:*

…the word is the most sensitive *index of social changes*, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularized and fully defined ideological systems. The word is the medium in which occur the slow quantitative accretions of those changes which have not yet achieved the status of a new ideological quality, not yet produced a new and fully-fledged ideological form. The word has the capacity to register all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change. (Vološinov 1973, p. 19)

Slow accretions and change without definitive shape are what *Keywords* charts: a social history of the actual and the potential; the emergent and the pre-emergent; paths taken and those not followed, promises kept and promises abandoned, potential realised and unrealised.

What is so crucial here is that this is not a model whereby one meaning supplants another in a linear history of semantic drift. Words are directed towards previous meanings as well as anticipating future meaning. Thus, an utterance is responsive to previous utterances
and anticipates how other utterances might respond to it: ‘every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 280). What Vološinov and Bakhtin offer is a philosophy of language that is ‘dialogic’: to interrupt the ongoing social life of language and define it is always going to be a provisional exercise, a centripetal move. More crucially what their ‘dialogism’ offers is a profound riposte to structural linguistics. Theirs is a philosophy of social exchange and negotiation, of performance and action. Words are not governed by their structural relationship to other words, but to the social scene of language where words are alive to intentions and desire, not on an individual basis (you are never completely in control of linguistic meaning), but through communities and collectivities. For Bakhtin the utterance is ‘entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgements and accents’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 276), and because of this it never exists in the abstract, in a pool of structural relationships:

For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. (p. 293)

A ‘keyword’ analysis that is dedicated to the radical contextualism of Vološinov and Bakhtin is unlikely to be able to capture all the flavours and tastes of a word as it moves from one genre to another, one group to another, but it can try and capture something of the social
tonality and feeling of a word as it is used by different communities at different historical moments.

At the end of his ‘introduction’ to Keywords, Williams write that his ‘publishers have been good enough to include some blank pages, not only for the convenience of making notes, but as a sign that the inquiry remains open’ (Williams 1983a, p. 26). For Vološinov this openness would be a recognition that ‘any utterance, no matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication. But that continuous verbal communication is, in turn, itself only a moment in the continuous, all-inclusive, generative process of a given social collective’ (Vološinov 1973, p. 95). This sense of on-going continuity doesn’t just project into the future (we all know that language will mutate further), it also projects back into the past.

THE OED AND HETEROGLOSSIA

Williams’s anecdote about the word ‘neighbour’ highlights one of the tensions within Keywords and within keywording more generally. One way of describing that anecdote would be to say that it is a conflict between the claims of a Cambridge university philologist and the vernacular and oral practices of specific living communities. Another way of describing this cultural clash might be to see it as a conflict between the centripetal forces within heteroglossia and its living centrifugal energies. It is worth noting that not only does ‘neighbour’ not appear in Keywords but that the oral, vernacular evidence that is so crucial for Williams’s anecdote is also missing from the entries. For Vološinov and Bakhtin language lives in a dynamic environment that Bakhtin named heteroglossia [raznorečie] which he glosses as the ‘social diversity of speech types’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 263): ‘the authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized
heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accentuated as an individual utterance’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 272). It is the fleeting life of speech as much as writing that characterises utterances, and it is worth noting the durability of different types of utterance: from the archival preservation of the published book to the barely remembered humorous remark; from the carefully conserved political pamphlet to the xeroxed poster left in someone’s attic; from the curated and maintained website to the mass of today’s digital flotsam and jetsam.

For the Bakhtin Circle the sociality of language is not simply the way that each one of us might inflect and accentuate the same word slightly differently, but that different groups, different generations are simultaneously struggling within heteroglossia:

In any given historical moment of verbal-ideological life, each generation at each social level has its own language; moreover, every age group has as a matter of fact its own language, its own vocabulary, its own particular accentual system that, in their turn, vary depending on social level, academic institution (the language of the cadet, the high school student, the trade school student are all different languages) and other stratifying factors. (Bakhtin 1981, p. 290)

What matters here is both the privileges provided to certain language users (to politicians and newspaper publishers, say, or in Bakhtin’s Renaissance context to poets, scholars, monks and knights) and the reality of the ‘lower levels’ (street songs, local fairs, and so on) where words are used often ironically, playfully, contradictorily and ‘where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 273). To translate that to a world closer to us we could say that language exists across those whose words are recorded, published, and broadcasted and all those voices that we could name very broadly as subaltern. It is this
heteroglot situation that Williams catches when he contrasts the scenes of the word ‘culture’ at a genteel Cambridge tearoom where ‘culture’ functions as ‘the outward and emphatically visible sign of a special kind of people’ (Williams 1989a, p. 5), and a space where ‘culture is ordinary’: ‘A few weeks ago I was in a house with a commercial traveller, a lorry driver, a bricklayer, a shopgirl, a fitter, a signalman, a nylon operative, a domestic help (perhaps, dear, she is your very own treasure). I hate describing people like this, for in fact they were my family and my family friends’ (Williams 1989a, p. 12). Broadly put this is a conflict between those whose words count and are counted, and those whose thoughts and feelings are written on the wind, unheard by philologists.

But if Williams’s theoretical anecdotes constitute the inaugural scene of Williams’s project (which I think they do, and it is an inaugural scene for Cultural Studies more generally) then this heteroglot dimension is generally missing from Keywords and this is due primarily to Williams’s reliance on the OED. Williams is profoundly aware of the limitations of the OED and explicitly recognises the ‘ideology of its editors’, the way that its philological orientation means ‘that it is much better on range and variation than on connection and interaction’, and the problem with the way that ‘the written language’ is ‘taken as the real source of authority’ (Williams 1983a, p. 18-19). As he makes clear, few of his Keyword entries end up staying completely within the account offered by the OED ‘but even fewer could start with any confidence if it were not there’ (p. 18). It is worth pushing a little harder at these limitations, not just for understanding Keywords but also for thinking about the future of keywording as a Cultural Studies practice.

It will seem obvious that any dictionary, any glossary, can’t help but be driven by the centripetal aspects of heteroglossia, even a dictionary as capacious as the OED. This dictionary began its public life under the editorship of James Murray in 1884 as A new English dictionary on historical principles: founded mainly on the materials collected by the
philological society, and it was completed in 1928 as a series of 125 paperbound fascicles issued across the period. In 1933 it was renamed the Oxford English Dictionary and published as twelve volume edition which incorporated supplementary material (often referred to as OED1). An expanded edition was prepared between 1972 and 1986 as a series of supplements (OEDS) which were then incorporated into a second edition of twenty volumes in 1989 (OED2) (outside the period of Williams’s work on Keywords). A third, full revision of the dictionary is currently underway (OED3). The version that Williams used was the paperbound serial editions (OED1) that had been given to him by one of his extramural students, Mr W. G. Heyman: ‘as a young man he had begun buying the paper parts of the great Oxford Dictionary, and a few years later astonished me by arriving at a class with three cardboard boxes full of them, which he insisted on giving me. I have a particular affection for his memory, and through it for these paper parts themselves’ (Williams 1983a, p. 26).

OED1 (which is still the foundation for all OEDs) was an extraordinary collective effort of the Philological Society of London (as well as other members of the public) who brought together over five million citation slips which were sorted in terms of dates and semantic variation. (It took Murray five years to publish the first fascicle A-ANT in 1884.) In 1989 when the OED was first digitalised, John Willinsky was able to start searching it to make visible the pattern of its citational practices (or what we would call its citational politics). The most cited authors for OED1 (in order) are William Shakespeare (nearly thirty-three thousand citations), Walter Scott, John Milton, John Wyclif and Geoffrey Chaucer. The single book that gets the most citations is the Bible (but with less citations than Shakespeare). The most cited authors that were added for the OEDS are: George Bernard Shaw, Rudyard Kipling, James Joyce, P. G. Wodehouse and D. H. Lawrence. The most cited woman author in OED2 is George Eliot with a tenth of the citations of Shakespeare. When Willinsky assesses that there is ‘less-than-adequate coverage, most notably of women, Commonwealth,
and working-class writers from all levels of literate activity otherwise covered by the citations’ (1994, p. 11) you can’t help sensing in his ‘less-than-adequate’ the tone of sarcasm.

Newspapers and periodicals are also a substantial part of OED data and while OED1 cites from periodicals that are now defunct (Pall Mall Gazette, Daily News) the top periodicals (in order) in OEDS are Times, Nature, Listener, Daily Telegraph, and Manchester Guardian, and in OED2, Times, Daily Telegraph, New York Times, New Yorker, Listener.\textsuperscript{16} While we can see a broadening out of English in OED2 to include evidence from USA, what we get is still an overwhelmingly narrow idea of English, that Willinsky (using one of Williams’s terms) designates as ‘the selective tradition’ (Willinsky 1994, p. 5). The centripetal aspect of the OED was hardly an unintended consequence of the project. One of the early advocates of the project, Walter Skeat, saw its mission as opening the eyes of students ‘to the Unity of English, that in English literature there is an unbroken succession of authors from the reign of Alfred to that of Victoria, and the language which we speak now is absolutely one, in its essence, with the language that was spoken in the days when the English first invaded the island and defeated and overwhelmed its British inhabitants’ (Skeat cited in Willinsky 1994, p. 55). The imperialist ambition of the initial project not only marks is Victorian heritage but also determines its function in the twenty-first century.

Yet it is easy to see why it is still a staple for keyword analysis: there is nothing to match it for sources for historical semantics. As Deborah Cameron points out the new linguistic corpora that are being produced today might include a larger collection of vernacular speech from a greater range of language users within a multicultural society, but they are not oriented to historical semantics (Cameron 1998). Williams’s solution to the limitations of the OED was to supplement it with evidence with his own voluminous reading of working-class literature, political and cultural theory, and cultural history. The literary and political orientation of Keywords is a mark of Williams’s interests as much as it is embedded
in the *OED*, and the historical frame of Williams’s concern with the felt effects of industrial capitalism often directs his attention. These are aspects that make *Keywords* a difficult book to use today to fashion new generations of students into practices of keywording. It is also hard to imagine any student having the sort of resources that come with prolonged research: google searching is no match for the slow accretions of semantic noticing. But there is no reason why Cultural Studies would necessarily want to hold on to Williams’s work as the template for keywording. The literary orientation of Williams is not necessarily shared by most Cultural Studies practitioners today, and some of the most provocative uses of keywording has a more activist dimension than the careful mapping undertaken by Williams.17 There is an activist dimension in *Keywords* noticed by one of the books original reviewers, who recognised that Williams often ‘suspends the job of historical description of words and things in order to create a consciousness of the very immediate dangers lurking in current usage, where the reality of problems may in fact be obscured by language’ (McKeon 1977, p. 135).18

We might also want to question the sense of scale of *Keywords* and keywording for future work, both in terms of length of entries and in the number of interlocking terms. One recent example of keywording, one that argues with the historical trajectory mapped by the *OED*, is a book length project examining a single word (‘identity’) (Moran 2015). To imagine heteroglossia is to imagine infinity. To envisage an exhaustive corpus of historical semantics that could underwrite keywording is part of an imperialist imagination. We need a different sense of scale and a different sense of cultural dynamics as the basis for keywording. In Deborah Cameron’s important intervention in the relationship between *Keywords* and corpus linguistics, she makes important points concerning the scale of corpora in relation to their ability to represent the political dynamism of language. ‘I would’ she writes ‘be prepared to argue that for theoretical and methodological reasons, the larger the volume of data, the less
revealing it tends to become about how meaning has been made by any but the most “mainstream” speech communities’ (Cameron 1998, p. 44). ‘Representative sampling’, for instance, would obscure and often erase ‘unrepresentative “minority” voices who may really have defined a historical moment, even if later they lost out in the struggle for the sign’ (p. 44). As a scholar of linguistics and as a feminist, Cameron is ‘continually amazed by how quickly and completely the most radical or non-mainstream inflections of “ideological” signs are obliterated from – if indeed they were ever inserted into – the mainstream public record’ (p. 44). How can keywording take heed of Cameron’s intervention while maintaining and expanding the socio-political orientations of Williams?

TOWARDS A MORE HETEROGLOT KEYWORDING

This is not the place to attempt a full-scale keywording exercise that could provide a more heteroglot examination of words such as ‘environment’, ‘infrastructure’, ‘intuition’, ‘resilience’, etc. Instead, I’m simply going to suggest four areas that might be worth considering for altering keyword research, with a smattering of examples from some initial research on ‘environment’. The reason for choosing ‘environment’ is both because the word is so tightly entangled in the planetary climate catastrophe we face (it is marked by social struggle), and because it is a word that due to its radically ambiguous scales (encompassing the neighbourhood and the planetary, and the worlds in between) lends itself particularly well to heteroglot examination. It is of course both impractical and impossible to try to map the life of a term within dialogic heteroglossia (the overwhelming majority of oral accentuations of words, key or otherwise, are of course never recorded). A much fuller account of ‘environment’ would need to build on Williams’s entry for ‘nature’ in Keywords (which he describes as ‘perhaps the most complex word in the language’ 1983a, p. 219) as well as
Jennifer Daryl Slack’s entry for ‘environment/ecology’ (in Bennett, Grossberg, Morris 2005, pp. 106-109). It would also need to take up the challenge and the invitation ‘to animate, rather than delimit our appreciation of the environment as vital to the past, present, and future of cultural studies’ (Pezzullo 2008, p. 363). What I propose here is something much more modest and more eccentric than the desire to exhaustively map and historicise the various meanings of a term. My argument is to suggest that keywording would do well to turn its attention to the centrifugal (literally, eccentric) aspect of the heteroglot conditions of meaning, rather than to remain focused on an OED derived centripetal meaning (though it would be irresponsible and ahistorical to ignore the centripetal pull of meaning). While the danger for Cultural Studies is that such an emphasis would be open to accusations of cherry-picking examples to fit political and cultural preferences (an accusation that as we have seen has also been made about the OED and is ontologically unavoidable for the construction of any corpus) the benefits would mean shifting the activity of keywording towards a greater ability to supply Williams’s ‘resources of hope’ (the strategic possibilities across semantic time and space for progressive allegiances and alliances).

The four suggestions all entail reorienting the sources for keywording: (1) shifting the focus from the literary to the multidisciplinary, the interdisciplinary and the experimental; (2) reimagining the corpus from the published text to all forms of media; (3) widening the voices that author semantic examples to include international ‘Englishes’ and subaltern voices (broadly conceived); and (4) to pay more attention to material culture as a form of semantic accentuation and concretization.

1. Shifting the focus from the literary to the multidisciplinary, the interdisciplinary and the experimental. While the OED is often focused on the literary, the political, the legal, and the medical (particularly where cultural keywords are in play), a more eccentric and centrifugal
attitude might pursue other disciplinary worlds, particularly where words take on a more experimental meaning. The term ‘environment’ plays a constitutive part in biology. In the 1920s in a poor working-class area in London the biologists Innes Pearse and George Scott Williamson set up the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham. The Centre was a place for all sorts of sociality, from swimming to carpentry. The goal was not to treat illness (pathology) but to study forms of healthy adaption to the environment (ethology). For Pearse, Williamson and other radical social biologists that came to work in Peckham, the term ‘environment’ took on new meanings. On the one hand it was treated as a living organism, as being alive, and inseparable from the biological life of the human inhabitants. On the other it was treated as a scene of ‘justice’. The environment of Peckham and its environs was seen as the basic part of an ‘organismal society’ (Pearse and Crocker 1943, p. 291), where the Centre functioned as a ‘zone of mutuality’ between families. The social drive of the project was established by the words of the Halley Stewart Trust that partly funded the project: ‘For every Individual by furthering such favourable opportunities of education, service, and leisure as shall enable him or her most perfectly to develop the body, mind and spirit: In all Social Life, whether domestic, industrial, or national, by securing a just environment…’ (cited in Pearse and Crocker 1943, p. 2). A ‘just environment’ was a radical envisaging of equally distributed resources for human flourishing within an urban setting.

The work of this group of experimental biologists is just one example. Other examples could easily be found within architecture, urban studies, farming, zoology, and so on.

2. Reimagining the corpus from the published text to all forms of media. That modern subjects live across media is a constitutive position within Cultural Studies. The first issue of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies’ series Working papers in cultural studies (Spring 1971) included a translation of Roland Barthes’ ‘Rhetoric of the image’, where he rhetorically
asks ‘Is there always some text within, below or around the image? (Barthes 1971, p. 42). We could reverse Barthes’ question: ‘Are there always some images around keywords?’ What images are envisaged by the word ‘environment’? In the UK in the 1970s the government’s Department for the Environment published an extensive literature of guidebooks, reports, manuals, and so on. A quick survey of the covers of their publications shows guidebooks displaying heritage and conservation landscapes of standing stones, medieval castles, and country houses which contrast with reports on urban decay and problems such as football spectator violence. This is more than a contrast between rural history and urban problems, it is a contrast in modes of visualising: ‘heritage’ literature is rendered with paintings and etchings; ‘urban problems’ with xeroxed black and white photography.

Another example from the 1970s, and one now generally lost, was the way that ‘environment’ was coupled with ‘media’ to describe visual experiments that we would now call ‘immersive’ media. That these experiments often had an ecological orientation would be important for keywording ‘environment’. This would also be an example that would contradict the OED’s assessment that ‘environment’ in its verb form (synonymous with the verb ‘to surround’) was obsolete by the end of the nineteenth century. As well as all forms of visual media (painting, film, photography, television), evidence could come from oral histories, radio recordings, social media and so on.

3. Widening the voices that author examples to include world ‘Englishes’ and subaltern voices (broadly conceived). Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris’s New keywords (2005) has established a more international sense of ‘Englishes’ but as they note they wanted ‘to do more translinguistic as well as transnational tracing’ (p. xx). ‘Eccentric’ keywording wouldn’t aim to cover the full range of users but might tip the balance more towards Indigenous peoples, peasant and proletarian cultures – those voices that remain unheard by the OED. Stephen
Muecke’s entry for ‘country’ (in Bennett, Grossberg, Morris 2005, pp. 61-63) could serve as a building block (alongside Jennifer Daryl Slack’s entry for ‘environment/ ecology’ [ibid, pp. 107-9]) for an extended keywording of environment which could start out from indigenous understandings of the earth we inhabit. To keyword environment so that it is conjugated with an Indigenous Australian understanding of ‘Country’ would accentuate the word in a distinctive manner.

It [Country] means home and land, but it means more than that too. It means the seas, and the waters, the rocks and the soils, the animals and winds and all the beings, including people that come into existence there. It means the connections between these things, and their dreams, their emotions, their languages and their Rom (Law). It means the ways we emerge together have always emerged together and will always emerge together. (Bawaka Country et al. cited in Wooltorton et al 2020, p. 921)

This could be further developed by coupling it with the word ‘Liyan’:
‘Liyan is a felt resource handed down through the labour of learning one’s culture, often through life-long intergenerational cultural mentoring’ (Kelly 2019 p. 387), or which Muecke describes more succinctly as ‘the gut feeling of Country’ (Muecke 2019). The Indigenous meanings and words for ‘environment’ wouldn’t have to supplant the semantic histories of the OED but neither would they be a supplement to them. Instead, as in Muecke’s New keywords entry, they would animate a dynamic contrast, articulating multiple worlds of meaning.

4. To pay more attention to material culture as a form of accentuating. Words and material culture exist in a dynamic disequilibrium: the word ‘identity’ means many things but becomes concretised when you have to carry an official identity card; ‘mobility’ has abstract
pretensions but is instituted by roads and flight paths, by border controls and traffic jams, by cars and airplanes, and by countless other ‘vehicles’ and ‘vehicular systems’. An example of the material culture for ‘environment’ might include devices for recording temperature. Do instruments of measurement constitute environmental scales? For instance, we could say that the domestic thermometer, which measures the temperature of a human body to ensure that it is conducive to sustaining life, turns the human body into an environment (other measuring and visualising devices might have similar effects). The idea of ‘global environmental warming’ requires a network of weather stations measuring near-surface air temperatures and relays of ships and buoys recording the surface temperature of the oceans. What material devices were necessary to aid the semantic journey of the term ‘environment’ from referring to local and immediate surroundings to a planetary idea of ‘the environment’?

While these four suggestions may seem like a giddy expansion of the corpora for keywording, the point would be not to enlarge the data sources in the hope of being more representative, rather the point would be to provide a greater capacity for eccentric evidence that emphasises counter-semantics, radical projects, and useable histories. Instead of obliging the keyword analyst to undertake an endless scouring of multiple corpora, it would, I hope, provide more wiggle room for digressive wandering and eccentric compiling with the intention of unveiling new echoes and resonances across different communities of language users. For instance, could an eccentric keywording of a word like ‘environment’ forge connections between biologists working in London 1920s and environmentalists eager to adopt Indigenous practices of caring for Country? What would be the benefits, for instance, of seeing the movement to defund the police in the US as an environmental as well as a racial issue?
CONCLUSION

Colin MacCabe, who, in 1974, had been appointed by Williams as a philologist to teach ‘English language in relation to literature since 1500’ (Inglis 1995, p. 278) at the University of Cambridge, has more recently claimed that Williams’s project of Keywords is best named as the ‘New Cambridge Philology’ (MacCabe 2008b, p. 65). The journal Critical Quarterly, which MacCabe edits, has since 2006 regularly published articles dedicated to ‘keyword research’. In naming Williams’s Keywords as the inaugural example of the ‘New Cambridge Philology’ and claiming a direct inheritance to the book he co-edited, Keywords for today: a 21st century vocabulary, MacCabe wants to insist that Keywords is an extension of so-called ‘Cambridge English’: ‘What unifies both Keywords and Keywords for today is the method of close reading developed by I. A. Richards and elaborated by William Empson for the reading of complex poetry. Williams’s most original contribution came from applying this method to the historical record of English language’ (MacCabe and Yanacek 2018, p. xiii).

To position Williams as an heir of Cambridge English erases Williams’s attempt to break with Richards, Empson and Leavis. While it is clear to me that Williams was initially drawn to the ‘practical criticism’ of Richards and others, which encouraged an excessive attention to the words of a poem prior to any knowledge of authorship or context, he was also keen to distance himself from it. Indeed, the renunciation of Cambridge English (perhaps never fully realised) is, I would argue, the basis for understanding Williams’s development of an approach towards reading that would be identified as Cultural Studies. As early as 1950 he would identify ‘as one who finds himself perhaps nearer to the Marxist than to the Leavis position’ (1993, p. 177), and by 1958 he writes of how traumatic his break with Leavis and Cambridge English was: ‘I was deeply impressed by it; deeply enough for my ultimate rejection of it to be a personal crisis lasting several years’ (Williams 1989a, p. 9). Talking
much later about the lure of the critical virtuosity encouraged by Cambridge English, Williams claimed that what was ultimately wrong with Richards’ approach was that it produced a destructive position: ‘the induced passivity of the intensely active reader’ (Williams 1981, p. 122).²²

In Williams’s discussion of *Keywords* in his gruelling interviews with the *New Left Review* we can see how *Keywords* was intended as a third way beyond what Stuart Hall would call the two paradigms of Cultural Studies. ‘The result’ of his approach to language, writes Williams:

… is a notion of language as not merely the creation of arbitrary signs which are then reproduced within groups, which is the structuralist model, but of signs which take on the changeable and often reversed social relations of a given society, so that what enters into them is the contradictory and conflict-ridden social history of the people who speak the language, including all the variations between signs at any given time. This also involves the rejection of idealist accounts of language as a common possession – at its best, Leavis’s notion of language as a continuous legacy through the ages that carries the finest insights of the community. (Williams 1981, pp. 176-7)

The refusal of structuralism and Cambridge English meant that Williams was primed for the work of the Bakhtin Circle.

The intense scrutiny of ambiguity and complex words, which is at the heart of Cambridge English, relishes the polysemy of language. The dialogic position, which sees the utterance as a social act, relies on the multiaccentuality of language. It may seem to be merely a technical distinction, but this difference has profound consequences. *Keywords* as a book and as a project is, to my mind, best understood within the tradition of Vološinov, as an
attempt to see language as a record of social activity, of centrifugal and centripetal forces, of emergent and residual feelings, filled with intentions and dreams. And ultimately the project of Cultural Studies’ keywording is an invitation to participate in releasing meaning from the grip of ‘ruling class papers and publicists’ to allow it to imagine and initiate a more egalitarian and democratic future. Today, for keywording to pursue a ‘journey of hope’, the sources of semantic histories need to be reimagined.

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1 This second book might be better named as a glossary as it is often an explanation of technical terms within the field.

2 This is announced in the 1958 foreword to *Culture and Society* (Williams 1990, p. iv).

3 Both McGuigan 2019 and Richardson 1995 mention the importance of Vološinov, but neither pursue this link in detail.

4 Looking at the way the vocabulary shifts between the first and second edition of *Keywords* Annabel Patterson makes the claim that ‘the primary audience for Williams’s *Keywords* must have been college students or teachers wishing to get up to speed on some of the more fashionable words in academic conversation and writing’ (Patterson 2004, p. 68-69). My guess is that both editions of *Keywords* had as their ‘first’ audience the working-class members of his adult education classes.

5 He repeats the anecdote in Williams 1981, p. 61 and reveals that the anonymous interlocuter mentioned in the introduction to *Keywords* is Hobsbawm.

6 Williams is not refereeing to the Welsh language (he was not from a Welsh-speaking part of Wales), but to different class idiolects.

7 An extended and updated version of this example is given in 1989c, pp. 113-4 describing how the local pub in Pandy started a collection for Williams when he won a scholarship to Cambridge, not realising that the scholarship meant he wouldn’t need additional funds.

8 Pocock, who was six years younger than Williams, is an interesting example of the circulation of ideas at this time. He studied English at Cambridge with F. R. Leavis, went on to Oxford to take a DPhil in anthropology with Evans-Pritchard, translated Durkheim into English, joined the University of Sussex in 1966 (where he established the School of African and Asian Studies), and was instrumental (along with Dorothy Sheridan) in saving and housing the Mass-Observation archive in the 1970s, and reigniting the Mass-Observation project in the early 1980s.

9 I have endeavoured to draw out the anthropological dimension of the term ‘structures of feeling’ in Highmore 2016.

10 The year after the first edition of *Keywords* was published Terence Hawkes published *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1977) as the first in Routledge’s New Accents series. The book (widely deployed on undergraduate courses in the late 1970s and through the 1980s) is testimony to the growing enthusiasm for Saussure’s structural linguistics and to semiotic structuralism more generally in the anglophone academy in the 1960s and 1970s. (Books aimed at undergraduates are published to disseminate ideas that are already in circulation and to make them more accessible to a non-specialist audience.)

11 To say that the writing on Bakhtin is voluminous is an understatement. For an overview of the work on the Bakhtin Circle as a whole see Erdinast-Vulcan and Sandler 2015. This overview also clarifies (to the extent that this is possible) the questioned authorship of Vološinov’s book, while also providing information about the philosophical differences between Vološinov and Bakhtin’s positions on language.
For the importance of philology across the primarily Western humanities see Turner 2014.

Other exponents of keywording have voiced criticisms of the *OED*. Thus, for Bennet, Grossberg and Morris ‘today, the cultural biases of the *OED* are perhaps even more apparent’ than they were for Williams (2005, p. xxii).

Information on the *OED* has primarily come from Willinsky 1994, and also from Cameron 1998 and Bailey 1991.

These figures are from the Appendix of Tables in Willinsky 1994, pp. 209-221.

Anyone familiar with UK newspapers will recognise the deeply conservative nature of these rankings.

For an early example see Grover 1987. For a more recent example see Genova, Mezzadra, Pickles (eds) 2015.

It is this element that I think is evident most notably in Bennett, Grossberg and Morris 2005.

There is not the space here to discuss the choice of keywords, but it strikes me that as well as focusing on words that are key to unlocking particular epochal conjunctures, keywording might have a more speculative role in preparing the semantic terrain of ‘keywords for the future’ (words not currently at the centre of the semiotic fray but which might help in future struggles).

See also Milroy and Revell 2013 and Muecke and Eadie 2020.

See: Adamson and Durant 2007; Allan 2007; Allan and Durant 2019; Durant 2006; Heath 2008; MacCabe 2008b; Wales 2007. This is not an exhaustive list. The team that worked on the entries in *Keywords for Today* are collectively called the Keywords Project see MacCabe and Yanacek eds. 2018: vii-viii. Forthcoming is a book called *Exploring keywords in modern English*, to be co-authored by Philip Durkin (who is Deputy Chief Editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*), Kathryn Allan, Alan Durant, and Colin MacCabe, to be published by Oxford University Press. The book will provide extended discussion of around fifteen words. Allan and Durant account of ‘Environment’ (2019) is a draft entry for this book.

It is also worth mentioning here that William Empson was completely unsympathetic to the project of *Keywords* when he reviewed it (Empson 1977). The critique of Richards by Williams is not dissimilar to the complaint that Stuart Hall makes about endlessly attentive close readings of the *Sopranos* divorced from the ambition of understanding the larger conjuncture (MacCabe 2008a, p. 29). For a substantial discussion of the relationship between Richards and Williams see Chandler 2020.