## Introduction

## The Keywords Collective

**T**HIS ISSUE OF *ESC:* ENGLISH STUDIES IN CANADA celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of the journal, first published in Spring 1975 under the editorship of the late Lauriat Lane, Jr. The history of *ESC* has been rehearsed on several occasions over the last thirty years, most recently in Clara Thomas's "The Beginning of *English Studies in Canada*" which appeared in the twenty-fifth anniversary issue.

As a way of marking our thirtieth birthday—the age past which we can no longer be trusted—we are looking back to another publishing event of similar vintage: the 1976 publication of Raymond Williams's *Keywords*. In what follows, thirteen scholars meditate on the continuing valency of thirteen keywords—from Art to Work. This collage of responses offers an idiosyncratic snapshot of where we have come from and where we are now. "The river is moving / The blackbird must be flying."

But, to paraphrase Heraclitus, you can't step on the same blackbird twice. If Williams's keywords were still as culturally situated today as they were in 1976, a retrospective wouldn't be necessary. Or maybe it would.

1 Lauriat Lane, Jr. passed away in March. Please see Rowland McMaster's tribute in the last issue of *ESC*.

THE KEYWORDS **COLLECTIVE** is Cecily Devereux, Michael O'Driscoll, Harvey Quamen, Cheryl Suzack, Jo-Ann Wallace, and Robert Wilson. In the final stages of preparing this Readers' Forum, we were joined by Brad Bucknell, Christine Ferguson, and Mark Simpson. As Annabel Patterson and Terry Goldie suggest in this issue, Williams's project wasn't exhaustive then either. That's no great indictment of Williams, of course—today, we're sceptical of totalities and we value partial perspectives. There's widespread admiration for Williams's achievement, even when we disagree with him.

And Williams's ambition continues to astound. He sought to resolve the post-war academic parallax, to stem verboseness in the sea, to combat nincompated pedagogues. What began as a drawer overstuffed with twenty years' worth of paper has provided a spit of dry land, a point of departure for more than one generation of scholars. Whether Williams then was anything more than a watery realist has yet to be determined. Whether ours is still "a wordy, watery age / That whispered to the sun's compassion" has yet to be argued. Like a sunny port of call or a baggage claim in a busy airport, *Keywords* is an opportunity to examine all that we can't leave behind. This forum thus serves in part as an opening and unpacking of a small collection of baggage—or the revisiting of particular ports—and a collective meditation on how, as Williams showed in 1976, values and usage in academic language continue to change—or not—over time, in shifting contexts, and in relation to various pressures and circumstances. Like the automated castle and the city in Thomas Wharton's Salamander, the terrain of language changes around us, and it's worth pausing from time to time to get our chronotopic bearings.

Our selection, of course, is somewhat less, at 13, than Williams's 131, and this second look can only be partial and preliminary. But it's not exactly random either. Members of the editorial team (here The Keywords Collective) each chose the two terms we most wanted to include in the forum—claimed them, that is, and at some points fought over who "got" them. We were surprised in some cases to find words we hoped to reconsider were not in Williams's vocabulary of culture and society at all—patriarchy, for instance, or gender. We discussed contributors we thought would meditate in compelling ways on the words we selected, and solicited responses to the keyword challenge. In some cases contributors wanted to write on another word; in some cases a keyword was added when we found a sudden connection between the work of a scholar and what Williams wrote on a particular term. With one additional solicited contribution over the allotted two apiece, we ended up with thirteen ways of looking at Keywords itself.

*Keywords* provides an opportunity to examine certain words, but it is also an opportunity to consider Williams. His little lexicon has served a couple of generations of literary scholars in need of security and certainty.

That's the way with lexicons. They build walls around meanings and provide small gardens where it is possible to potter about without much fear of contradiction. The garden of Keywords is well constructed, its walls apparently sturdy enough to keep out marauders. It seems to promise the stability in meaning that scholars often desire. But look a bit more closely and you can see the walls crumble. There are spots where it is quite easy to sneak in. That's the way with walls. It is also the way with Philology and Williams's project was, at heart, philological. It strove to identify past meanings and to fix the significance of important ("key") words in the terms of their etymology. You cannot step twice on the same blackbird, but you can bake it, over and over again, into the same pie or into many pies. One reason the walls around Williams's garden crumble in places is that he missed the point that Deconstruction has made so clear: etymology opens, not closes, significance. If a word has had various meanings, or has had a history of meaning, then it will also have a future. Its meanings guarantee its instability. When the pie is opened, blackbirds, in many multiples of twenty-four, fly out singing songs that praise the openness and ceaseless metamorphoses of words.

As we prepared this forum, we found ourselves reconsidering another of Williams's keywords. As The Keyword *Collective* we are both the *ESC* editorial team working to edit and present in this issue a diversely coherent body of responses to the question of why these thirteen words matter, or at least how they signify now, and the collective subject speaking here in a voice that represents "us." In this work we have implicitly taken up the brief and provisional definition of a noun referring to a social and political unit that Williams situates in the "new democratic consciousness" of the early nineteenth century and that he suggests in 1976 was still, in those terms, "not common." Current academic convention and the practices of individual merit assessment ("accountability" being another keyword that Williams did have to "account" for) continue in obvious ways to militate against collective work—which may be why collective work continues to be "not common." This forum was collectively assembled, and of course we like that performance of democratic consciousness; but in fact what is compellingly "collective" about it is to be found in the meeting of the individual responses as they engage with and reflect upon ideas and issues and words that arguably matter to us all. These responses overlap and mesh and sometimes conflict in ways that highlight the fundamentally collective nature of academic debate, and return us finally to Williams's sense not of the nineteenth-century usage of a noun but of an adjective "used from its earliest appearance to describe people acting together."

ESC was born out of a desire to act together and to work from a collectively diverse national consciousness. Its commitment has always been to another of Williams's keywords, "community." In a spirit of enlarged community, then, we offer as our wish for the next thirty years of ESC these lines from Olive Senior's poem about that most Albertan of blackbirds, "Magpie":

...you simply refuse to be overlooked, you celebrant of the variegated, the parti-coloured, mixture of paint, pigment, picture of pied beauty.

Happy birthday, ESC!

## **Works Cited**

Senior, Olive. "Magpie." Over the Roofs of the World. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2005.

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Wharton, Thomas. Salamander. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001.