

Rethinking the Culture of Education with Raymond Williams

Y S Sochuiwon Priscilla Khapai

I Culture and Education: A Twin Project

It is not often in academic writing that one encounters language which is as inviting as fiction, where theoretical ideas are in constant flux with emotional experiences and their complexities illuminated in lucid form. So, when I first read the essay “Culture is Ordinary” (1958) by Raymond Williams, I was struck not only by his ideas – which I found to be as relevant today as they were back then – but also by a marked sense of sincerity in his voice. His ability to weave together deeply personal experiences with the larger questions of culture in Britain provided a convincing glimpse into the fundamentals of who and what constitutes a given culture. That the personal is inextricable from the public is evident in many of the anecdotes shared in his essay – for instance, the moving account of how his grandfather, a farm labourer, wept openly in church when he was turned out from his cottage in his fifties and had to begin again as a roadman or the story of his father who took great pride in the fact that he had started a trade-union branch and Labour Party group in the village.¹

These accounts speak to the ways in which the lives of working-class people were profoundly affected by the mechanisms of the social systems that governed them and how their responses, in turn, also affected such systems. Further, Williams’s exploration of these issues in the context of an ever-evolving relationship between culture and education struck me as utterly relevant for the present era, where education systems around the world are set to face unprecedented futures due to the pandemic. Thus, what follows is a close reading of Williams’s essay and the ways that it has informed one of my recent ventures into the academic landscape of high school systems in India. This exercise proved to be quite productive in examining the validity of his ideas.

Williams’s style of employing the individual lens when talking about larger, more conceptual frameworks of society is perhaps not merely an aesthetic one. In fact, I believe that it is one of the most deliberate and effective means of resisting

¹ Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11.

the monolithic gaze of elitist cultural gatekeepers who often clump together lower-class people as “the masses” and dismiss their experiences as secondary. Williams counters such stereotypes by insisting on a microscopic lens which reveals the concrete experiences of ordinary people and reveals that they are truly as rich as any other. His upbringing as a working-class boy who later went to an elite university, i.e., Cambridge, afforded him an interesting position, whereby he could experience the richness of an ordinary life while still acquiring the empowering intellectual skills of an academic. This also meant that, for Williams, theoretical discourse had to be in critical dialogue with lived experience and that the crux of principle matters, whether regarding social justice or cultural phenomena, was equally perceivable to people of all classes. Therefore, he says, “I speak a different idiom, but I think of these same things,” also keeping in mind that the intents and desires of his working-class father and grandfather were the same as his.² Williams considered culture to be the collective possession of a society and identified two of its key features as follows:

A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; (and) the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction.³

This insistence on both the shared communal aspects of culture as well as the highly individualized ones sheds light on Williams’s style, which glides between the personal and the general. It is also fascinating to note how he unravels the functionality of such an argument as a way of critiquing the more dominant narratives of his time, which were quite dismissive of the experience of common people. How exactly did he demonstrate this? To begin with, his insistence on “ordinary common meanings” opened the canvas of influence – regarding the ideas that formed and shaped a given culture – to the domain of the public. This was to acknowledge the contributions of ordinary people in the construction of what is considered quintessentially the “English way of life.” The willing, organic, and creative participation of ordinary people in the construction of this culture was what granted it the validity and popularity that it could never have achieved on the basis of exclusionary principles. So, it was ironic how so many elite gatekeepers of “English culture” tried to exclude them and differentiate them from their “tasteful” way of life. Unfortunately, this form of erasure was prevalent, and Williams gives us an example when he refers to the so-called “teashop” he encountered during his student life at Cambridge:

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

I was not oppressed by the university, but the teashop, acting as if it were one of the older and more respectable departments, was a different matter. Here was culture, not in any sense I knew, but in a special sense: the outward and emphatically visible sign of a special kind of people, cultivated people. They were not, the great majority of them, particularly learned; they practised few arts; but they had it, and they showed you they had it. They are still there, I suppose, still showing it, though even they must be hearing rude noises from outside, from a few scholars and writers they call – how comforting a label is! – angry young men. As a matter of fact there is no need to be rude. It is simply that if that is culture, we don't want it; we have seen other people living.⁴

Thus, Williams rejects the exclusiveness of such spaces. At the same time, it is important to note how he does not engage in a combative mode of exchange with these people, simply stating that, “if that is culture, we don't want it; we have seen other people living.” This can be read as his way of bringing to the fore these “other” people who are often erased from such elite spaces. It is also a way of asserting that their existence and way of life, which actually constitutes British culture, is accessible to all people, and that culture is not some tangible object which can be sealed off like private property.

II Growing into and out of a Discourse

Williams states explicitly that “I was not oppressed by the University,” as way of showing, quite plainly, that people like him were not at all foreign to the business of learning and acquiring an education.⁵ In other words, he chooses to forgo the stereotypical, sentimental narrative of a poor working-class boy who has the good fortune of attending a university like Cambridge and should therefore embody the fairness of the British education system, which was supposedly based on merit. The truth is that it was not a just system; and Williams is not afraid to point that out. As he states in the essay: “It is still very obvious that only the *deserving* poor get much educational opportunity, and I was in no mood, as I walked about Cambridge, to feel glad that I had been thought deserving; I was no better and no worse than the people I came from.”⁶ It becomes quite clear that, though he appreciated his education at Cambridge, he also found it deeply patronizing that the noble status of learning was granted only to a select few like him, and that prestige was associated solely with the idea of a university education. To him, learning was part and parcel of living, in whichever way or form that took place. The exceptionalism that was often accredited to the supposedly rare deserving student from a disadvantaged background – which was really just thinly veiled contempt – was not lost on him:

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 14. Emphasis in the original.

I was not amazed by the existence of a place of learning; I had always known the cathedral, and the bookcases I now sit to work at in Oxford are of the same design as those in the chained library. Nor was learning, in my family, some strange eccentricity; I was not, on a scholarship in Cambridge, a new kind of animal up a brand-new ladder. Learning was ordinary; we learned where we could. Always, from those scattered white houses, it had made sense to go out and become a scholar or a poet or a teacher. [...] At home we met and made music, listened to it, recited and listened to poems, valued fine language. I have heard better music and better poems since; there is the world to draw on. But I know, from the most ordinary experience, that the interest is there, the capacity is there.⁷

Hence, for him to call culture “ordinary” was to put forth a certain notion of openness that was starkly absent in the mainstream ideas of culture prevalent at the time. According to Williams, culture was not some rigid form of living carved out of the suffocating walls of exclusive teashops; it was out there in the streets, in the countless, unexpected nooks and corners of a society where life brimmed with the free flow of ideas and experiences of people from all ages and backgrounds. Curiosity, desire, ambition, love, and passion were (and are) universal human traits, fuels for the evolution of a given culture in its passage along time. It could not be fenced off by material barriers, especially not when it came to the first principles of human potential and capacity. But having said all that, Williams was also well aware of the grave limitations in material constraints. For instance, in a capitalist society, time is a luxury for most working-class people; however, time is essential to the development and production of certain kinds of art or ways of learning that require great technical skill and supervision.

He writes: “Few of us could be spared from the immediate work; a price had been set on this kind of learning, and it was more, much more, than we could individually pay. Now, when we could pay in common, it was a good, ordinary life.”⁸ In other words, he is not arguing for one kind of culture over the other but instead suggests that one can embrace both and that, in fact, both should be made accessible to all. To Williams, it is crucial to acknowledge the myriad ways in which human intelligence exists in society, and especially in the lives of ordinary people, whose very labour makes possible precisely all the time it takes to produce the more “intellectual” kinds of work that are commonly celebrated. In short, all people play a vital role in the subsistence of a culture through their unique form of participation.

Perhaps one could say that, given his background, it was quite natural for Williams to take these positions. However, I would argue that these ideas were not at all easy to navigate, let alone to articulate and make popular in his time. It was a divisive period in which many arguments were strongly binary and there seemed to be little room for ambiguous musings. For instance, the contentious

⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁸ Ibid.

political lines that erupted during the ideological climate of the Cold War,⁹ when fractures emerged within older Left formations in Britain due to the “coordinates of a new cultural politics unfolding around race relations, consumerism, everyday life, social class, and women’s oppression.”¹⁰ At multiple levels, people were pushed to place themselves and their arguments clearly on either side of political debates. So, it is to his credit that Williams was able not only to avoid the mainstream bourgeois ideas of culture in his era, but also to resist this divisive climate and express his qualms with Marxism. While he retained a critical appreciation for the insights acquired through a Marxist framework, such as “the relationship between culture and production, and the observation that education was restricted,” what he rejected was how gravely prescriptive it had become, and how this had stifled any possibility for the emergence of a more creative and radical perspective.¹¹ Williams states:

The Marxist interpretation of culture can never be accepted while it retains, as it need not retain, this directive element, this insistence that if you honestly want socialism you must write, think, learn in certain prescribed ways. A culture is common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a man’s whole committed personal and social experience. It is stupid and arrogant to suppose that any of these meanings can in any way be prescribed; they are made by living, made and remade, in ways we cannot know in advance.¹²

Williams was evidently frustrated by the persistent desire within Marxist discourse to control the course of action and the outcome of any socio-economic development by relying on neat, stable structures of socialization. In fact, the inner mechanisms of a society’s cultural fabric were evidently far more fluid and difficult to grasp firmly. Change being the only constant, Williams felt that Marxism had failed to respond effectively to the realities of a swiftly changing post-industrial British society.

Another aspect in which Williams strayed from Marxist orthodoxy was his stance on the question of modern popular culture, represented by motion pictures or juke-box hits. The disdain that was typically directed at people belonging to the lower classes when it came to their tastes and ways of relishing the arts was something that Williams opposed strongly. Without being uncritical, he was far more accepting and open to the prospects of “the masses” embracing new tools of technology. The whole notion of a British culture being cheapened or diluted as a result of more and more people accessing its channels of production and distribution was wildly prevalent during this time. However, despite not having clear-cut, affirmative answers, Williams resisted these conventions and held off space in his writing for dwelling on the complexities of these social realities, anchored by faith in the

⁹ For a brief account of Williams’s work in this context, see R. Shashidhar, “Culture and Society: An Introduction to Raymond Williams,” *Social Scientist* 25.5/6 (1997): 33–53.

¹⁰ Steven Gotzler, “Years in Cultural Studies: 1956 – The British New Left and the ‘Big Bang’ Theory of Cultural Studies,” *Lateral* 8.2 (2019): n.p., web.

¹¹ Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” 15.

¹² *Ibid.*

possibilities of collective intelligence. Hence, he said: “[T]he only thing we can say about culture in an England that has socialized its means of production is that all the channels of expression and communication should be cleared and open, so that the whole actual life, that we cannot know in advance, that we can know only in part even while it is being lived, may be brought to consciousness and meaning.”¹³

III Williams on Education

Another important subject of the famous essay at hand is yet to be addressed. This is the issue of Williams’s views on education, which I have significantly more trouble agreeing with. But rather than jumping directly into a critique, I will briefly summarize how he establishes connections between culture and education and what his views on the latter are. Understandably, education was one of the most important subjects for Williams. It was the means through which he had escaped a life of farming or other manual labour, which had been a given in his family for generations, and entered a new domain of intellectual pursuits, exercising agency of a kind that was generally kept from people of his class. He says: “There is an English bourgeois culture, with its powerful, educational, literary and social institutions, in close contact with the actual centres of power. To say that most working people are excluded from these is self-evident, though the doors, under sustained pressure, are slowly opening.”¹⁴ Thus, his desire was for this pressure to be released and for the doors to be fully open.

One of the ways through which he expresses this desire is by using a similar line of logic as with his views on culture: arguing that education is ordinary. This is to imply that education is meant to be accessible for all people. A persistent criticism against the popularization of education during his time manifested itself in blaming the “masses” for all the ills of a rapidly expanding media industry, an excuse that he opposed firmly. He argues that it is wrong to specifically blame ordinary people for the ills of their society when there is no evidence for such claims at all, but, in fact, plenty of evidence for the exact opposite. Williams deduces that the whole notion of the “masses” plays a significant role in scapegoating the poor for common problems in society:

Masses became a new word for mob: the others, the unknown, the unwashed, the crowd beyond one. [...] Certainly, it was the formula that was used by those whose money gave them access to the new communication techniques; the lowness of taste and habit, which human beings assign very easily to other human beings [...]. There was more than enough literacy, long before 1870, to support a cheap press, and in fact there were cheap and really bad newspapers selling in great quantities before the 1870 Act was heard of. The bad

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 14.

new commercial culture came out of the social chaos of industrialism, and out of the success, in this chaos, of the “masses” formula, not out of popular education.¹⁵

Just as it was not a novelty to encounter the coexistence of bad and good newspapers, it was not a contradiction that rapid commercialization produced undesirable effects, which is often the case with any kind of new technology becoming widely used. So, to blame all the faults on ordinary people was beyond reason and, frankly, quite insulting. It was certainly not enough reason to stop the popularization of education. As a matter of fact, it was all the more urgent to provide quality education for everyone in order to build up a populace with a robust capacity of critical thinking, vital for confronting the social chaos of the times. The other arguments referenced in the text, whether classified as equations or analogies that he disapproves of, are more or less different variations of this argument. It is also worth pointing out that Williams advocated for a particularly strong liberal arts foundation for a university education, which could then eventually be supplemented by a specialist degree in the desired area for each student.¹⁶ Many of his propositions are well-intentioned and he carefully assesses both the pros and cons of each scenario before making his suggestions. Hence, theoretically, they are all very sound. But reading the essay today, a little over six decades since it was first published and as a reader living in a totally different country, I wish to interject a few doubts regarding the feasibility of some of these suggestions. And much in the spirit of Williams’s essay, I will resort to a few anecdotes of my own instead of elaborating on more theories.

IV

New Terrains: A Glimpse into the Complex Challenges of the Indian Education System

In December 2020, I was part of a project titled “School Education Response to Covid-19 in India and the Way Forward,” which was led by the Indian Institute of Education (IIE) at the Savitribai Phule Pune University. Appointed as the field investigator for my home state Manipur (in Northeast India), I visited twenty schools distributed across eight districts in the state during the course of this project. My field work involved collecting data from students and teachers regarding the impact of India’s rapid lockdown on many high schools, particularly those located in rural and tribal areas. More specifically, the project was about analysing whether the digitization of education in their schools was successful or not. Far from any kind of success story, the interactions with students and teachers revealed glaring gaps in the accessibility of resources, whether it was regarding electronic devices, internet facilities, or matters of technological literacy. All of these factors led to

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶ Ibid., 21.

severe academic setbacks during the lockdown. It seemed that one of the primary means through which popularization of education was to be achieved in our times, namely the digitization of learning, was in fact effectively alienating those most in need of aid and support.

To give an example: During the fieldwork I had to carry survey sheets around with me, which the students were required to fill out while I assisted them. And when it came to certain questions regarding, for instance, how many phones their families owned or if they could afford internet data for online classes, I could sense visible discomfort and reluctance in the students who wanted to either skip over the questions entirely or copy exactly what their friends had written. Similar cases were also noticeable among the teachers, particularly among older female teachers, who were more than sufficiently qualified in their own subjects, but totally unfamiliar with digital gadgets. Trying my best to help them fill out the forms and reassuring them that their contributions could help in bringing change, I completed the project with my own share of doubts and frustrations. How could anyone who had seen the ground realities of e-learning in this country consider it to be sustainable for the majority of its students who are struggling to meet basic needs? The following figures give a sense of how many students were affected as a result of digitization during the pandemic:

A total of 320 million learners in India have been adversely affected and transitioned to the e-learning industry, which comprises a network of 1.5 million schools. An NSSO 2014 report highlights that 32 million children were already out of school before the pandemic – the majority of them belonging to the socially disadvantaged class in the country. [...] In a recent 2017-18 survey, the Ministry of Rural Development found that only 47% of Indian households receive more than 12 hours of electricity and more than 36% of schools in India operate without electricity. This suggests that while students from families with better means of living can easily bridge the transition to remote learning, students from underprivileged backgrounds are likely to succumb to inefficiency and a lack of adaptation, either because of the inaccessibility of the technology or the low education of their parents to guide them through tech-savvy applications.¹⁷

Thus, unlike the situation in which Williams felt the need to defend the easy access of people to new technology and advocate for their collective participation in producing innovative solutions for the resulting problems, the more recent situation created by technology in Indian schools seems to be far more adverse and harmful. In fact, I would go so far as to say that e-learning should not be imposed on these schools at all. I am no Luddite, but knowing now to a reasonable extent not only the usefulness but also – and more importantly – the redundancy and gripping addictiveness of these tools, I am convinced that one cannot be so naïve as to simply expose young children, who are easily influenced, to them and their associated dangers. While these devices rapidly encroach upon traditional classroom spaces,

¹⁷ Sushma Modi and Ronika Postaria, “How Covid-19 Deepens the Digital Education Divide in India,” *Weforum.org*, 5 October 2020, web.

can they actually substitute for the benefits of live interaction and active participation? I do not think so. This new breed of popularization of education, currently endorsed by a populist ruling regime in the country, needs to be met with critical investigation and rigorous questioning for the long-term health of schools in India. It cannot be embraced simply on the basis of some good-faith assumption that collective participation will outdo its ills automatically. If that is the “new normal” or the “new ordinary,” then I want something *extra-ordinary*.

The truth is that the roots of inequality are so deeply entrenched in Indian society and their symptoms have been festering for so long that any kind of update in national policy, meagre disbursement of funds, or merely changing the tools of learning will not alleviate any of these problems in a meaningful way. In fact, with a means as vague and polarizing as digitization, which is layered with complications from the lack of technological infrastructure to training teachers or even simply ensuring that the content created online would be accessible for all students (without taking in the question of quality control yet), there is little probability that the process will be successful. On the contrary, it will only exacerbate the already existing gaps of inequality in these social systems. In the end, the poorest students in the most remote regions, who do not have access to phones, data packs, or even a stable network, will be the ones most adversely affected. During the field work, what I witnessed at the ground level was either a total shutdown of schools that could not afford to transition to e-learning or an absolute collapse in the quality of teaching and learning in those schools which had somehow managed to transition with the barest minimum (for example: setting up WhatsApp groups where teachers would share some notes and videos occasionally). The digitization process is, therefore, not about using technology to advance the means of education; rather it is about outsourcing the responsibilities of concerned authorities to thoroughly investigate the ways in which millions of students are falling behind, to address their concerns, and to restructure the school system to appropriately remunerate these devastating losses in learning. The need of the hour is effective structural transformation, not supposed updates in the form of digital alternatives that only harbour graver inequities.

To further elaborate on this need for transformation, let me share another example. During my field trips in some of the more remote villages in the Ukhrul district (a hill district of Manipur), where most schools were completely shut down or repurposed as quarantine zones, I noticed that many of the children had resorted to helping their families, whether in the form of farming, tending animals, or other kinds of household and communal activities. Here, I kept running into young Tangkhul Naga girls who had taken up weaving. The Tangkhuls are one of the Naga tribes living across different states in the Northeast of India, primarily in the hill regions of Manipur and the Sagaing division in Burma. Like other Naga tribes, they have a rich culture of textiles rooted in local practices of weaving. Through my interactions with the young girls and the research that followed, I discovered the rich world of Naga textiles and came to appreciate it as a resilient form of Naga culture – one which had survived the destructive waves of colonization, Christianization,

and the reign of Indian militarization. In fact, I followed this thread of interest into my Master's dissertation and engaged with critical questions about how indigenous communities like the Nagas countered mainstream historical narratives, both in terms of form and content, by studying the semiotics of one of the textile pieces they created.

Without getting into specifics (due to economy of space here), one of the chief agendas of my research was to investigate alternative sources of literary narratives in Naga culture. Textiles proved to be an incredibly rich source not only due to their historical value as an older form of art but also due to their continued persistence in contemporary times as a flourishing medium of expression, whether that be in the social, cultural, religious, or even political domain.¹⁸ I mention all of this to emphasize how so much of local knowledge and vernacular forms of recording, practicing, and preserving knowledge is largely excluded from the current education system in India. During my research, I was overwhelmed by the epistemological gaps encountered when trying to access and analyse various subject matters related to this form. There are little to no means in the current system to incorporate the varieties of languages and dialects, artistic forms, skills, and systems of knowledge from all these communities which are at risk of disappearing. Without falling into rhetorics of cultural sentimentalism that often invoke static notions of reification and romanticization, I believe we can still pursue rigorous questions about preservation in which critical appreciation is a key element and the problematics of cultural loss are wedded to creative notions of change, imagination, and experimentation.

One of the ways in which Williams addressed the question of reform in his essay was by mentioning the case of the working-class men who had amended the English university syllabi to include their lived realities.¹⁹ Such changes at the textbook level may prove to be useful to certain extents, but the current situation in India, especially after the pandemic, calls for far more radical forms of intervention. What is needed is a robust new system of learning which can effectively accommodate all the specific and diverse forms of knowledge already circulating organically. Exploring specific solutions of this kind will require a far more complex set of data and a longer essay than this one, but I believe we can still ask some potent questions. Firstly, is it right to assume that since schools had shut down all forms of learning had ceased? Are the skills, labour, and intangible forms of knowledge gained through community building, care, and hospitality during this period which people of all ages, not least of whom were a large populace of school children at home, participated to be regarded as a "waste of time"? What is learning and education at

¹⁸ On Naga textiles, see Marion Wettstein, *Naga Textiles: Design, Technique, Meaning and Effect of a Local Craft Tradition* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2014) and Vibha Joshi, "Dynamics of Warp and Weft: Contemporary Trends in Naga textiles and the Naga collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford" in *Approaching Textiles, Varying Viewpoints: Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America via DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska-Lincoln* (2000), web.

¹⁹ See Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 21.

the grassroots level where limited – if not total – absence of resources is the norm? With specific reference to the young girls who were weaving, we can also ask: When schools reopen, why should there not be room in the classroom for a serious discussion on textiles, covering an analysis of the craftsmanship, ideas, and syntactic details which are portals to rich narratives of history, culture, and society? Should such students be subject to quizzes and exams from history textbooks which completely exclude their own histories? Should they feel behind or even drop out because they cannot read the notes or messages from a WhatsApp group? It is against such a backdrop that we should seriously consider the question of digitization (carried out with such speed and “efficiency” in India) and the question of evaluating students through standardized forms of testing, thus conveniently leaving out the irreducible complexity of communal learning, which, for better or for worse, can only take place in a physical classroom. By complexity I mean the rich diversity of lived experiences that students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds bring into a classroom where they think and co-exist as a collective body, even if temporarily. Is this not a vital component of their education? Can exclusionary digital platforms really replace this sanctuary of communal learning? These, at least, are the questions that have stayed with me since the fieldwork and I leave you with them as well.

I mention all of this to emphasize how so much of local knowledge and so many vernacular forms of recording, practising, and preserving knowledge are absolutely excluded from the current education system in India. During my research, I was overwhelmed by the epistemological gaps encountered when trying to access and analyse these matters. There are little to no means in the current education system to incorporate the varieties of languages and dialects, artistic forms, skills, and systems of knowledge from all these indigenous communities; and they are at risk of disappearing completely. In some forms that disappearance has already become reality: for instance, in the near total loss of oral practices among the Nagas during and after the colonial era due to the imposition of Western ways of living and learning in the name of “education” and “civilization.”²⁰ Today, one can notice similar negligence in the way that the Indian education system is failing to reinstitute many such practices and their associated histories in its curricula. Now, with regards to this matter of curricula, Williams discusses in his essay some working men who had amended the English university syllabi to include their lived realities.²¹ But in the case of the schools and communities that I visited in Manipur, I suspect minor changes in the syllabi will not do. Rather, a robust new system of learning needs to emerge: one which can effectively accommodate all the specific and diverse ways in which learning can take place without compromising on its quality. The new and the old can be complementary. Why should there not be as much emphasis on weaving as there is on learning how to code? After all, the former

²⁰ For more on this development, see Arkotong Longkumer, “‘Along Kingdom’s Highway’: The Proliferation of Christianity, Education, and Print amongst the Nagas in Northeast India,” *Contemporary South Asia* 27.2 (2018): 160–178.

²¹ Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” 21.

involves laborious, sophisticated craftsmanship with distinct syntax and vocabularies in composing a design for any genre of textiles. Thus, what I am suggesting is that, instead of half-heartedly forcing some standardized form of learning on these communities, the process of education reform should take on the form of a dialogue to ensure a more fruitful exchange.

V Against Optimism: A Conclusion

I wish to put forward one final point of contention with Williams's essay. It becomes quite clear upon reading the essay, particularly in parts where he is advocating for an increase in funds, that Williams strongly believed in the stability of the nation state and the legitimacy that could be ascribed to various social structures in its name.²² Perhaps he had good reason to believe in the social systems of his time, but in our world today, where crisis after crisis looms on the horizon, this way of thinking is no longer adequate. Our times are marked by changes of a scale far greater than any national imagination can fathom, whether this be regarding the migrant crisis, climate change, or the current pandemic. Hence, the openness that Williams wished to retain, and that I also hope remains, may require articulations of a kind that are completely outside the vocabulary of existing systems. The stakes are so much higher, and a good-willed social system, though it may have a part to play, in and of itself will not be able to address the overwhelming problems of our times. Social systems work when nation states function at a reasonable level, but when millions are literally spilling over and outside these constructs called nation states, what then? In what way can we remain open, but also join in collective action to solve some of the most pressing problems regarding healthcare, education, and precarious socio-political problems that await our societies in the near future? What kind of *ordinary* education will be able to address this? It is in this sense that I say some truly *extra-ordinary* ideas are perhaps the only means left – and the need of developing such ideas calls for embracing positionalities beyond the nation state.

²² Ibid., 22–23.