

‘What I Came to Say’: Raymond Williams, the Sociology of Culture and the Politics of (Performance) Scholarship¹

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This essay seeks to reconsider and appropriate the cultural politics of Raymond Williams for the project of formulating a critique of current ideas about politics and theatre. The residual values of cultural materialism as theorized by Williams, based on a concept of culture as productive, processual and egalitarian, have become less influential under the pressures of post-structuralism and neo-liberalism. The current attraction to Rancière, for example, emphasizes dissensus over consensus and singularity over collectivity. Post-dramatic theatre rejects direct engagement with political discourse altogether. While recognizing that these emerging theoretical ideas continue the historical romance of avant-garde theatre with rupture and dissent, Williams can remind us of still-powerful strategies that are rooted in identifying shared experiences, relating cultural production to its sociopolitical context, and the value of collective struggles.

I approach Raymond Williams as a historical figure (d. 1988), and consider his ideas to be ‘residual’ in our field (to invoke one of his key concepts that I will discuss further). Even so, or perhaps equally so, the discipline of theatre and performance studies continues to draw on his work in productive ways. For example, a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* (2013) entitled *Alphabet: A Lexicon of Theatre and Performance* was conceived as a tribute to the memory of theatre scholar David Bradby, but it can also be seen as a ‘Keywords’ project, linked implicitly to Williams as well.² In their editorial, Maria Delgado, Dominic Johnson, Aiofe Monks and Lara Shalson write that the aim of the issue is to

examine how we function as theatre professionals and how we juggle the responsibilities of writing about culture across the page and stage. ‘Stage’ is not a singular entity here, but is rather the wider context in which our performative activities as human beings take place. Theatre is one of the many cultural manifestations that offer a way to consider how communities come together to investigate the social practices through which they operate.³

This was also the goal of Williams’s cultural sociology, and indeed it is the objective of my own effort here to highlight and reaffirm his value for our field.

Williams was part of a British intellectual legacy that has nourished me and many others for over fifty years. I encountered Williams during my graduate-school studies in the US in the early 1970s, and later followed his work and that of his colleagues and

sometime critics. Chief among these were Stuart Hall, Terry Eagleton and the figures of the *New Left Review*. Readers will recognize that this legacy is not politically neutral but decidedly of the left, although what that meant and means remains an ongoing debate and each of its key interlocutors had his or her own distinct definition. In light of the 'New Communism' and other recent manifestations of the desire to reappropriate a history often discarded, I turn to Williams to ask, what is left for us to recuperate, renegotiate, rethink and re-perform from the leftist project?⁴

For a short time as a student, Raymond Williams was a member of the Communist Party, but for most of his adult life he kept a distance from the party while pursuing an intellectual negotiation with ideas of Marxism. One of his most important contributions was to affirm the importance of Marx's production paradigm, but to insist on the materiality of cultural processes and their productivity rather than seeing them as superstructural determinants of an economic base. For Williams, the achievement of his cultural materialism was to consolidate 'a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices, of "arts", as social uses of material means of production'.⁵ This cultural materialism, grounded in Marx but opening up the production paradigm, serves theatre and performance studies by showing the way these practices participate in broader social relations, affirming and/or challenging hegemonic social formations. Jen Harvie's recent book *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* explicitly describes cultural materialism as one of her key methodologies, and explains what that means for her project:

A cultural materialist approach emphasizes that cultural practices such as art and performance do not exist in some kind of material and historical vacuum, hovering in an idealized realm outside of time, political signification, social relations and material processes and conditions.⁶

This is an important defence of the value of performance as cultural production – in particular at a time when we have been seeing a disturbing shrinkage of political claims for theatre's relevance to the neo-liberal conjuncture. I will return to this topic later in the essay.

Raymond Williams: a short life-sketch

For those readers who may not be familiar with Williams's career, I include a short overview: Williams (b. 1921) was Welsh, the working-class son of a railway signalman, who, as a scholarship boy, attended Cambridge University. He served as an officer in the British Army during the Second World War and after the war taught adult education for fifteen years before his affiliation with the Cambridge English Department in 1961. He became professor of drama in 1974. Although in an English department, Williams turned away from literary criticism, especially of the moral sort associated with his senior colleague at Cambridge, F. R. Leavis. Thereafter Williams became best known for his contributions to the sociology of culture and as a founding figure of cultural studies, along with Richard Hoggart (Stuart Hall was his student). He was also one of the first scholars to take television seriously as being worthy of study, publishing *Television:*

Technology and Cultural Form (1974). Of course, such interdisciplinarity was rarer in those days, and Williams was criticized for having forsaken literature on the one hand, and for not moving sufficiently away from it on the other. He wrote many books developing his sociology of culture, but also a significant number of books on drama and tragedy, such as *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1968) and *Modern Tragedy* (1966, rev. edn 1979). Arguably, he was developing a view of performance similar to the 'broad-spectrum' approach of Richard Schechner that led to performance studies; evidence for this appears in his inaugural lecture upon becoming professor of drama.⁷ Although Williams is worthy of reconsideration for his legacy to theatre studies specifically, that is not my project here: rather, I am interested in his exemplary cultural politics and its implications for debates in our field today about the relationship between politics and performance.

Ordinary culture and the structure of feeling

The two concepts for which Williams is probably best known (apart from 'keywords') are, first, his pronouncement that 'culture is ordinary', encompassing both tradition and novelty, and, second, that within given social formations it is possible to identify 'a structure of feeling' which characterizes a whole way of life. A consideration of the value of Williams's thought for today's context can usefully begin with these ideas.

That culture is ordinary for Williams was 'a first fact'. The repetition of the phrase at the beginning and end of several paragraphs in his 1958 essay was clearly a rhetorical strategy, but his definition remains precise, and I quote it in detail:

Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land . . . A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; 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 . . . Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses: I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction.⁸

In this characterization we can see Williams's inclusive vision that refused to value high culture over popular culture, and the grounds for his democratic politics – his commitment to diverse perspectives, refusing boundaries such as class stratification. 'Stratification' is not a term Williams uses except when discussing others' ideas. It is not included among his keywords, and I would speculate that for Williams the term was too closely associated with Max Weber, and also with an American functionalism he disliked. Williams speaks of social inequality rather than stratification, and this also emphasized his normative judgement that inequality was unacceptable and democratization is the appropriate counter to stratification. As social theorist Jim McGuigan points out, 'What is novel about Williams's essay, however, is that he puts this anthropological notion

of culture into collision with the exclusionary concept and, also, calls into question elitist ideas concerning what counts as culture and its evaluation in education and learning'.⁹ In this early articulation of democratic culture, Williams was opposing the dominant intellectual formation; further scrutiny of these basic ideas also reveals Williams's international and anti-imperial sentiments. In 'On High and Popular Culture' Williams writes,

between nations, an invading or dominant society projects – by imposition or by suppression of a native culture – a version of 'high culture' that cannot in practice be abstracted from its direct political and economic interests . . . Thus whether within or between societies, respect for 'high culture' in its purest and most abstract sense must find a critical rather than a justifying form of expression and action.¹⁰

And on popular culture he comments,

within societies and between societies, there is very important work to be done in the recovery, and where possible and relevant the reanimation of suppressed, neglected and disregarded cultures: the meanings and values, in some cases the works, of dominated peoples and classes, and of minorities that have suffered discrimination. This is one crucial kind of a popular culture program.

But it is insufficient, and could decline into mere antiquarianism and folklorism if the real present is not connected to the recovered past. To do this we have not only to study contemporary cultural change . . . We have also to study contemporary cultural media.¹¹

In this essay, there is a refreshing insistence that the whole range of cultural production is worthy of study without necessarily levelling the value of each mode or genre. Williams's views on technology also come through here, although perhaps it is not quite clear how acute his disagreements were with media theorist Marshall McLuhan, because any 'global village' envisioned by the latter seemed to Williams clearly the product of capitalist forces that would impose rather than elicit the production of a popular global culture. The original challenge to British elitism of a particular moment in the late 1950s becomes a broader critique in light of our post-colonial and global culture. It is, indeed, still 'ordinary' but has broadened the scope of meanings and application considerably.

The second concept that is worth revisiting is Williams's 'structure of feeling', elaborated upon in *The Long Revolution* and *Marxism and Literature*, but running throughout his work. 'We are concerned', he writes,

with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable . . . We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.¹²

This approach, for Williams, constitutes a historical method as he argues that researching a structure of feeling for a given time and society is the best way to access it in the present.

This concept takes us well beyond Williams's own time toward our contemporary explorations of the body, of memory, of repertoires of performance in performance theorist Diana Taylor's sense – and even to contemporary affect theory. Cultural studies scholar Lawrence Gossberg comments, 'I suppose I "met" affect, as it were, in Raymond Williams: his structure of feeling'.¹³ Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart, too, begins the 2007 *Ordinary Affect* with this connection: 'Akin to Raymond Williams' structures of feeling, they [ordinary affects] are "social experiences in solution"; they "do not have to await definition, classification or rationalisation before they exert palpable pressures."¹⁴ So both of these concepts, the ordinariness of culture and structures of feeling, have had a life beyond their initial scope and purpose, one with direct pertinence for theatre and performance studies within the larger field of the arts.

While these two ideas are still prescient in our time, it is also important to recognize the ways in which Williams's work has been justly criticized and rethought given the enormous changes in the decades since his death in 1988. Probably the most important question is the relevance of Williams's ideas for a global culture characterized by mobility at an unprecedented level, a mobility which has unsettled the sense of belonging to a culture which formed the core of Williams's approach to cultural formations. In light of these developments, Williams's best-known pronouncement, 'culture is ordinary', is troubling. Leaving aside the conservative voices that accused Williams of levelling all qualitative discernments about culture, significant issues can be raised about how and what 'ordinary' means.

Theatre theorist Loren Kruger's trenchant commentary (1993) is representative of this line of critique. While Kruger sees that he 'calls art "ordinary" in order to redeem the "creativity in all our living", in other words, to find "art" in everyday life', she also thinks that hanging on to the category of art, with its qualitative distinctions, gets Williams into serious difficulties with the common-ness of culture when the 'selected tradition', as he calls it, is not common sense or open access, but rather an elite-owned and -controlled hegemonic culture which oppresses and excludes.¹⁵ On one hand, then, the available common culture, or what is shared in common, is not necessarily felicitous in its means of production, but, on the other hand, neither is it necessarily debased. Williams wanted to claim *both* that the common culture can be raw material for further positive creation and revision *and* that much mass culture is not art and is not valuable leisure activity. However, Kruger writes, 'He remains unwilling, at this point at least [mid-1960s], to recognize not only that leisure consumption constitutes an integral part of daily life and hence of popular culture in contemporary society and so cannot be dismissed as degrading, but also – and crucially – that the production of and response to entertainment cannot be completely summed up by "the culture industry".¹⁶

I do not disagree entirely with Kruger's characterization of this dilemma, although I would point out that while a number of scholars have linked Williams to the Frankfurt school's critique of mass culture, he differs from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in that, for a long time in his career, he held open the possibility for public ownership of media and therefore of a possible struggle over the production of culture in that

channel, while Adorno and Horkheimer saw no positive possibilities for mass media. In fact, Williams's early vision of television – and similarly the popular press – highlighted its democratizing potential. Unlike many of his Birmingham colleagues at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, however, he did not valorize all popular culture. Williams was trying to negotiate, between institutions and communities, some mediated space for participation and cultural transformation.

In retrospect, this negotiation has proved hugely difficult perhaps, but, in our field of theatre and performance, significant work has appeared on how particular communities relate to, appropriate or subvert mainstream forms of popular culture: some examples include theatre scholars Stacy Wolf and Bruce Kirle on Broadway musicals, and significant feminist work in the UK, such as feminist theatre scholars Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris's *A Night Out for the Girls*.¹⁷ Furthermore, internationally, as global culture has spread, we find many examples of how bits and pieces of global culture have been reworked or transformed in local appropriations or deliberate citations that produce new modalities of performance practice – for example, theatre scholar Noboku Anan's work on Japanese girl culture, or theatre scholar Christina McMahon's on lusophone theatre festivals as transformative performances.¹⁸ Perhaps the most important concept to retain from the early Williams is the utopian projection of a common culture – that if there could be, might be, such a thing, the place to find it is in the intersection of ordinary practices of everyday life together with learned skills and traditions of varying value.

The 'common-culture' hypothesis has also stimulated critique from those who think Williams's examination of empire was too limited or was largely missing from his work. This charge is best examined through his relationship with post-colonial theorist Edward Said. Said gave the first Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture in 1989, and in the introduction to *Culture and Imperialism* states that 'many of the ideas in this book are suffused with the ideas and the human and moral example of Raymond Williams'.¹⁹ Indeed, reading that book one has the impression that Said is carrying on a conversation with Williams as he moves along, including his explicit critique of the exclusions in Williams's accounts of empire. Perhaps most pertinently, a published conversation between the two juxtaposes Williams's explanation of his recourse in those early texts to common culture as an attempt to counter elitism and yet celebrate community with Said's rejoinder: 'As for me, although perhaps I'm putting it too strongly, culture has been used as essentially not a cooperative and communal term, but rather as a term of exclusion'.²⁰ This critique is sharper and more unforgiving in the younger cultural theorist Paul Gilroy, who comes close to calling Williams a white supremacist for his insider/outsider view of indigenous British culture.²¹

In pointing out these two instances of Williams's limitations, I deliberately moderate my own advocacy of rereading Williams for a reapplication to our field by acknowledging some of the limits and gaps in his project. The revision and critique of his original work is part of his own itinerary of historical change, of course, and, in his last years, he amended his views with regard to a number of issues. Nevertheless, we turn away from Williams's intellectual history at this point as I wish to press ahead with my own itinerary by turning now to our contemporary moment.

Theatre without politics?

There is a rising tide of opinion in recent theatre and performance scholarship that politics and theatre should be uncoupled; along the way identity politics should be discarded and theatre studies should turn increasingly inward to examine the apparatus of performance/theatre itself. I find myself profoundly out of tune with these ways of thinking, and will here try to explain why. In so doing, however, I also wish to recognize the vitality and energy of the 'emergent', and the need to develop new and fresh ways of conceiving the relationship between theatre and politics, or theatre and society – indeed Williams is my source for this insight. His concept of residual and emergent cultures is designed, on the one hand, to analyse dominant, hegemonic culture (in our moment, neo-liberal culture) and see concomitantly certain residual cultural practices and values that are obtained from an earlier time but have not been either folded into, absorbed, or totally rejected by this dominant culture; and, on the other hand, to identify emergent cultural practices that are novel, challenging, and on which the jury is out whether or not they will become coopted or change the hegemonic culture. I find these two concepts, emergent and residual, useful for avoiding an older binary conception of tradition versus experiment, which is less flexible and more value-laden. This discussion of critical perspectives frames what I have to say about some current ideas in our discipline around the question of what residual or emergent ideas are vying for air time or stage space, or for publication, promotion and research-council funding, to put an academic gloss on them.

The argument that theatre and politics ought to be separated should be seen in relation to our current worldly predicament: we find ourselves surrounded on many sides by an extreme global pessimism which accompanies the increase of seemingly unsolvable violent conflicts, acute poverty and suffering, ailing or broken political processes, and ecological depredation. The arts, we are told in some quarters, can no longer play a meaningful role in amelioration or critical intervention, and thus political ambition for theatre is derided as obsolete or even harmful, complicit with neo-liberalism's capture of the spectacle and the subject. The arguments sometimes begin with gentle mockery of the intention to 'do good', as if the naivety of imagining that performances could mean something or change anything was a ridiculous and outdated idea. These disparagements can come from some of the most intelligent and respected performance scholars in the UK, such as Nicholas Ridout, Joe Kelleher and Alan Read.

While Ridout argues in several of his books that the only real politics is in the apparatus of theatre when it shows us the ideological stakes of the mechanism or its own self-imbrication in social relations, he stops short of arguing for a breach between the terms.²² Joe Kelleher, in his excellent small book *Theatre & Politics*, also expresses a version of this thinking when he writes about

a concern shared among thinkers and practitioners for a politics 'of performance, [wherein] politics is figured as a continuing process that eludes representation to the extent that any productive thinker of theatre and the political would do well to separate the two so that each can do its work more effectively, to the benefit of both.²³

The implication is that, coupled up, theatre and politics cannot do either theatrical or political work effectively.

Alan Read, however, in *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement* goes further to declare that 'to politicize performance requires us to do away with the idea of political theatre, if not political theatre itself'. He wants to accomplish this by substituting political terms with what he deems 'less impressive, but perhaps more considered associations'.²⁴ As an example, he prefers 'plasma' to context, taking the word from philosopher Bruno Latour to mean a medium that can give rise to new endeavours, the equivalent to the archaic notion of ether, where, Read tells us, something remains to be done. Desiring to redesign performance and its politics, he states, 'If there was anything that we could usefully describe as "plasma performance", I would prefer it for the time being, to a "Political Theatre" or a "Social Theatre"'.²⁵ He also coins 'show-ciology' as a replacement term for the social or sociology. Read may be concerned about the political, but he attacks the vocabulary that makes its conceptualization thinkable.

As much as I admire this highly thoughtful and original book, I do not want the terms of political theatre to be occluded and replaced by another vocabulary.²⁶ Political discourse allows the conceptualization of the political. When neo-con Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history in his influential 1992 book, critics were quick to point out the difficulty of discussing the meaning of and relationship among events occurring over time if there was no 'history' as a conceptual category.²⁷ Similarly, if there is no political theatre, the explanatory power to consider the aspects of theatre that treat our efforts as human beings to work out ways to coexist on the planet and to set up and also to transform structures and practices that make up our collective life together are seriously weakened. Furthermore, it seems rather Western-centred and myopic to deny that sometimes theatre can be hugely important to large-scale political events – it all depends upon context. Performance-scholar-practitioners such as Sonja Kufninec, writing about performances addressing conflict in Palestine and Israel, or James Thompson, Jenny Hughes, and Michael Balfour's harrowing accounts of their theatre work in *Performance in Places of War*, show how critical, even to matters of life and death, theatre can be under specific conditions.²⁸

Beyond the UK, one can see the development of this anti-political theatre view also emerging from influential postdramatic theory. Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* appeared in 1999 and has been translated into twenty languages. In the book's epilogue he addresses his conviction that 'political conflicts increasingly elude intuitive perception and cognition and consequently scenic representation'.²⁹ Lehmann was reacting to his belief that media have deadened spectators' perceptions and ability to be critical, and that in any case the scope of global experience is now too complex to be represented. His strongest statement on the separation of politics and theatre, however, came in 2002: 'The political has an effect in the theatre if and only if it is in no way translatable or re-translatable into the logic, syntax, and terminology of the political discourse of social reality'.³⁰

In the years since these publications, the historical situation has significantly changed. Lehmann acknowledged this in 2009 in Belgrade, where he spoke of an impulse to 're-open the dialogue between theatre and society by taking up more directly political

and social issues'.³¹ He named some of the political changes that had intervened, such as 9/11, the rise of the populist right in Europe, and the continuing changes following the *Wende*, the fall of the Berlin Wall, concluding, 'Theatre definitely felt and feels a need to deal more directly with political issues, even if there are no solutions or perspectives to offer'.³² This still seems to be a typical Lehmann pronouncement, nevertheless, that takes away the utility of such projects before they even begin, for if there are no solutions or perspectives to offer, then what can theatre offer to public culture that is pertinent to this historical moment? According to a recent collection of essays, *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political* (cited above), it is clear that many scholars have struggled with the questions raised by the emergence of post-dramatic performances concerning their political potentialities.³³ In the twelve essays in this volume, every author manages to carve out a mode of political practice in relation to their specific performance examples. The nature of this politics is not didactic, and in most cases might be considered indirect, but neither is it negligible. One problem with post-dramatic discourse has been that the rhetoric of overstatement and the desire to rupture and change the discourse on politics and theatre create a lasting affect that is then difficult to combat or even modify or tone down.

One last example of this new kind of theatrical thinking can be found in performance theorists Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh's recently published collection *Performance, Identity, and the Neo-political Subject*, which links its project with the thinking of Read as well as the post-dramatic ideas coming from Lehmann. In targeting identity as a category they write,

What is emerging on the streets, as well as within academic discourse, is a strong sense that identity-based struggles are politically limited, and that a different type of grounded collective action is in order. We are at a stage where neo-liberal culture has absorbed any agency that politicized identities were once presumed to have. Capitalism sees in the fracturing of identity a wonderfully lucrative commercial project, to the extent that it does not simply respond to identitarian distinctiveness but cultivates it for its own purposes.³⁴

The assumptions are that a politics of identity is reductive and restrictive, and that in any case neo-liberalism has captured identity categories and repurposed them for commodified individual ends. As with other arguments described here, I do not entirely disagree with this perspective. What is suspect, however, is that identity categories can be dispensed with while real inequality and particular injustices need addressing. Let me take these arguments in order.

The easiest point to concede is that some theatre performances based on identity politics are tired and not convincing, so I will start by giving up that point. Exhaustion of form, the repetition of well-worn motifs, and lack of spectator interest are persuasive. However, identity remains and will remain a charged terrain of struggle, injustice and exclusion in many parts of the world. A politics that strives for the analysis and remedy of injustices cannot ignore identity. Theatre is a site where concrete individuals appear in embodied practices before others. To say that the critical markers of situated identities are no longer useful onstage or in our performance analyses only abdicates the struggle

in the trenches to address the differences and exclusions that govern us. While it is quite true, as Lehmann has written, 'That politically oppressed people are shown on stage does not make theatre political',³⁵ it is also quite true that if certain persons are not represented onstage at all, they will not find themselves recognized within the social surround as legitimate (political) subjects. If theatre managers do not take account of what sorts of people attend their performances, no attention will be paid to the absence of certain demographics. If public discourse no longer analyses differences among citizens, who will notice inequalities or have the language to describe and address them? The suggestion in these works that a new universalism is the answer to building a new solidarity of all is unconvincing because it recalls a too recent past when 'man' stood for and covered over woman (as in Williams's prose, in fact) and when a presumed common subject excluded precisely those who did not match the dominant – most often native people, colonized subjects, people of colour, non-heterosexuals and disabled people.

On the matter of neo-liberal economics absorbing identity categories to market targeted individualism, this is truly part of the divide-and-conquer methodology of hyper-individualism in our time. But identity categories are fluid, and offer a better hedge against hyper-individualism than does their abandonment. At least they are social and relational; at least they point to collective experience, collective memory, collective action. The subject of mobile, shifting and sometimes conflicting identities that is so much a part of transnational experience is left without political recourse or possibilities if not aligned with tangible means of organization, identification and coalitional politics. A serious and committed political artist or scholar must grapple with the differential naming of causes, groups and categories of beings that finally are understood as 'identities'. Even within the new emergence of post-human discourse, the privileging of animals and critique of anthropomorphism is itself a form of identity politics. What is true and important in the identitarian critique is that identity categories can themselves become rigid and coercive, and can be coopted to conservative ends.

Recently Rustom Bharucha, in describing the sociocultural construction of Muslim identity in the language of terrorism in this period of islamophobia, has drawn attention to the specific situation of political identity categories and their consequences within the Indian subcontinent. Arguing against what he sees as a liberal individualist view in the West that rejects identity specifics for general human rights, he writes about the specificity of the legal and political identities in the Indian context:

From my location in India, I would argue that ... liberal inclusiveness ... does not engage with the virulence of economic disparities, cultural and educational differences, and the sheer scale of injustices that cannot be wished away through 'conversations' across sectors of the population ... The struggle for equality in caste-bound and communally charged societies like India, for instance, cannot be written off quite so easily in favour of liberty ... Such liberal individualism is totally at odds with a political culture formed on the basis of community identities and 'personal laws', which are structured essentially around the norms and codes of specific religions ... It is in this context that any attempt to read 'Muslims' on a purely individual basis, divested of

religious or communitarian association, poses challenges in the Indian subcontinental context.³⁶

Bharucha is far from embracing all forms of identity politics – in fact his book includes a spirited critique of some attempts by US theatre scholars to gesture to global feminism through solidarity with women in Afghanistan – but he is uncompromising in his insistence that political identities have material consequences. He suggests that theatre and performance studies in the West have been preoccupied with blurring and hybridizing identities, and ‘at all costs in “transgressing” official norms as if this were the only decent, responsible, and above all creative thing to do’.³⁷ In turning deliberately outside a Western context, I am trying to complicate any rejection of identity politics as reductive or restrictive – it depends on the historical moment, the context of social, political and economic conditions, as well as the aesthetic practices in question.

Forget Rancière

In looking back to Williams, and in suggesting that his views still have relevance for theatre and performance studies today, I seek to contrast his emphasis on collectivity, community-building, and concrete identities with the ideas of the current major sociological influence on our field, Jacques Rancière. The contrasts with Williams are much stronger than the comparisons, but we can start with some harmonies in their thoughts about education, where Williams’s commitments to adult education bring him close to Rancière’s view that ‘all people are virtually capable of understanding what others have done and understood’.³⁸ Williams and Rancière also come close together in their advocacy of equality in the classroom: the teacher and the students should not be trapped in a hierarchical relationship – both bring their knowledge and intelligence to the table. Williams did believe, however, that there is an already existing culture to examine and interrogate, and that doing so is worthwhile; and further, that the specific insights a teacher may have will be different from those of the students – not necessarily better, or necessarily worth more, but differentiated none the less. Rancière, in what becomes his larger political theorization as well, is not very interested in special knowledge, but only in the speciousness of claims to mastery. Thus begins the division in their outlooks. While I cannot develop all the aspects of this dissonance in this essay, I can point to the fundamental differences in their viewpoints for the disciplinary positions I have been critiquing.

Rancière has an anarchist’s view of politics – and the theatre offers a fortuitous metaphor for his vision of political action. It involves spectacle, disruption and improvisation, and is complete without a programme or plan for consolidating any gains. This is the familiar concept of ‘dissensus’, which is against *consensus*, obviously, but is also best understood as interruptive, disaggregational and carried out by the individual. Indeed, for Rancière the idea of the communal is useful only in imagining or enacting a community of difference based on individualities. Equality is the chief value in his thinking, and for him, ‘The essence of equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with controversial figures of division. Equality is the power of inconsistent, disintegrative and ever-replayed

division'.³⁹ There is an order of roles, institutions, places and spaces that are perceived as 'natural' rather than as imposed. The police function, found in all hierarchical agencies, maintains this distribution, which is a distribution of perception and sensory feelings and awareness, rather than a system of ideas. You could say that Williams's struggle to articulate the 'structure of feeling' of a given social formation is an attempt to describe something rather close to Rancière's notion of lived sensibilities. However, for Rancière, there are always exclusions, and this order must always be broken. The distribution of the sensible cannot be modified or improved; it can only be ruptured so a new possibility can appear.

Political philosopher Peter Hallward has written in detail about the political limitations of Rancière's positions and concludes,

Rancière is not interested, as a rule, in the domain of theatre or anywhere else, in the group dynamics of collective mobilization and empowerment: the model in each case is provided by the isolated process of intellectual *self*-emancipation . . . In short, Rancière's emphasis on division and interruption makes it difficult to account for qualities that are just as fundamental to any sustainable political sequence: organization, simplification, mobilization, polarization, to name a few.⁴⁰

Rancière's writing has been extremely influential among the theatre scholars I have been discussing. He has seemed to reinvigorate a notion of artistic resistance, and to offer a way to be political without a programme. Following Hallward, however, it is possible that the applauded theatrical and political disruption is just a gesture – a momentary redistribution of the sensible without a follow-up move to consolidate gains. One kind of performance that has become prevalent and highly valued among theatre and performance scholars seeking political renewal is participatory or immersive performance that incorporates spectators. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière claims that 'emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting', and that the relation of aesthetics to an emancipatory project can be seen in its dissensual potential.⁴¹ Rancière writes,

Every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification. To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities. This is what a process of political subjectivation consists in: in the action of uncounted capacities that crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible.⁴²

This theoretical formulation has been extremely inspiring for artists working within traditions of the avant-garde, and also for those seeking a politics that could be meaningful in a time when faith in received political narratives has collapsed.

Performance theorist Andy Lavender has written perceptively about the strengths and weaknesses in Rancière's thinking for our field, interrogating participatory theatre and immersive performance experiences, genres of performance that fit very well with Rancière's desire to activate the spectator. However, Lavender registers an ambivalent judgement after experiencing four participatory performances ranging from a museum

event to sport to civic sculpture to studio theatre. He examines his involvement in these events, concluding,

We cannot say that non-passivity liberates us, nor even that it will be dissensual. For whilst the spectator is implicated, the work itself – at least, in these instances [the performances] – remains peculiarly unenterable. You don't change the event, here; you merely complete it. Nor do you change yourself. Rather, you consume culture and enjoy the visual affirmation of yourself as participating consumer. In this matrix of engaged experience, the offer is of a safe, secure arrangement for redistributed spectating. The spectator is implicated, even incorporated, rather than emancipated.⁴³

Lavender does not exactly 'forget' Rancière as a result of this conclusion. In fact, it is possible that Rancière's concepts enabled Lavender to discern exactly how participation eludes political action. However, if one of the liabilities of Rancière's thought is a tendency toward individualism and against collective action, the self-emancipation of a participatory theatrical event may be delusional if not corrected by a material practice of political consequence.

While Raymond Williams belonged to a different era, some of his concerns run parallel to those of Rancière. He, too, wanted to find a way to investigate and challenge the 'structures of feeling' governing the social formations of his time. He, too, believed in working-class creativity and cultural productivity, and both he and Rancière wrote about working-class cultural production in the nineteenth century in their respective national zones of attention. Williams, however, insisted on the possibility of a larger range of progressive political negotiations than simply rejection and disruption. He sought social connections, intersubjective relations, political possibilities based on identities, solidarities, and coalitions. Although far from being an 'identity politics man', he revised his class-only analyses in light of the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s. His programme of cultural materialism developed the kind of contextual, processual description of cultural productions that would allow us to see how alliances could be formed, particular grievances tackled, a way of life understood and explicated. If Rancière's energy to disrupt could be combined with Williams's efforts to consolidate, we might have a more robust left-looking theory underlying our scholarship and creative practice. If Williams's work can retain a residual power in our contemporary cultural formations, perhaps the neo-liberal individualism that underpins non-programmatic dissensus might yet be held accountable to a larger vision of collective organization and struggle, imaginative in its transgressions but ordered or at least strategic in its actions.

NOTES

- 1 It was a great privilege to give the original version of this article as a keynote address to the International Federation for Theatre Research at a time when my home institution, the University of Warwick, hosted the 2014 congress and – coincidentally – when I retired from Warwick (on 31 July 2014). Under those circumstances, I thought it might show no disrespect to Raymond Williams to appropriate the title of his book for my remarks: thus, *What I Came to Say* (London: Hutchinson-Radius, 1989).
- 2 Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* first appeared in 1976 (London: Croom Helm) and made explicit Williams's lifelong project to explore the cultural meanings of words and how they shift over time. Several revised editions followed. In 2014 a new edition was published

- (London: Fourth Estate) in connection with the Keywords: Art, Culture & Society exhibition at the Tate Liverpool. *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism* is also the title of the journal associated with the Raymond Williams Society, and the Keywords Project is an independent research project hosted by the University of Pittsburgh.
- 3 'Editorial', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 23, 1 (2013), pp. 1–2.
- 4 Of a number of projects that attempt to recuperate and renew the legacy of the left, the most visible has been the conferences and publications organized by Slavoj Žižek *et al.* starting at Birbeck Institute for the Humanities in 2009. Publications include Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *The Idea of Communism* (London and New York: Verso, 2010); and Slavoj Žižek, ed., *The Idea of Communism, Vol. II* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).
- 5 Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 243.
- 6 Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neo-liberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 16.
- 7 Raymond Williams, 'Drama in a Dramatized Society', in *Raymond Williams on Culture & Society: Essential Writings*, ed. Jim McGuigan (London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2014), pp. 161–71.
- 8 Raymond Williams, 'Culture Is Ordinary', in Jim Gable, ed., *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 3–14, here p. 4.
- 9 Jim McGuigan, 'Introduction', in *Raymond Williams on Culture and Society*, p. 1.
- 10 Raymond Williams, 'On High and Popular Culture', *New Republic*, 22 November 1974, at www.newrepublic.com/book/review/high-and-popular-culture, last accessed 31 March 2015.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 132.
- 13 Lawrence Grossberg, 'The Future of Affect: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual', in Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 309–38, here p. 310.
- 14 Stewart is quoting Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, pp. 133, 132. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 2–3.
- 15 Loren Kruger, 'Placing the Occasion: Raymond Williams and Performing Culture', in Dennis L. Dworkin and Leslie G. Roman, eds., *Views beyond the Border Country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 55–71, here p. 60.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Bruce Kirlie, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works in Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005); Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).
- 18 Nobuko Anan, *Contemporary Japanese Women's Theatre and Visual Arts: Performing Girls' Aesthetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Christina McMahan, *Recasting Transnationalism through Performance: Theatre Festivals in Cape Verde, Mosambique and Brazil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 19 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. xxvii.
- 20 'Media, Margins and Modernity: A Conversation between Raymond Williams and Edward Said', appendix to Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 177–97, here p. 196. I am indebted to Benita Parry's analysis of the tensions between the two men in this conversation. See Benita Parry, 'Overlapping Territories and Intertwined Histories: Edward Said's Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism', in Michael Sprinker, ed., *Edward Said: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 19–47.
- 21 'Williams does not appear to recognize Black as anything other than the subordinate moment in an ideology of racial supremacy'. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 50.

- 22 Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 3–4; Ridout, 'Performance and Democracy', in Tracy C. Davis, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 11–22, here p. 21.
- 23 Joe Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 25–6.
- 24 Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy, Engagement: The Last Human Venue* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 27.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 26 In fact, the book appears within the book series that I have edited with Brian Singleton, *Studies in International Performance* for Palgrave Macmillan.
- 27 Francis Fukuyama, 'By Way of an Introduction', in Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), pp. xi–xxiii.
- 28 Sonja Kufinec, *Theatre, Facilitation, and Nation Formation in the Balkans and Middle East* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); James Thompson, Jenny Hughes and Michael Balfour, *Performance in Place of War* (London, New York and Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2009).
- 29 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 175.
- 30 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Das politische Schreiben* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2002), pp. 16–17. Cited and trans. by Brandon Woolf, 'Toward a Paradoxically Parallaxical Postdramatic Politics?', in Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll and Steve Giles, eds., *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political* (London and New York, 2013), pp. 31–46, here p. 31.
- 31 Hans-Thies Lehmann, "'Postdramatic Theatre", a Decade Later', in *Dramatic and Postdramatic Theater Ten Years After: Conference Proceedings* (Belgrade: Faculty of Dramatic Arts, 2011), pp. 31–46, here p. 34. Quoted in Jürs-Munby, Carroll and Giles, *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*, p. 2.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 See Jürs-Munby, Carroll and Giles, *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*.
- 34 Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh, 'Introduction', in Causey and Walsh, eds., *Performance, Identity, and the Neo-political Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1–20, here p. 2.
- 35 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 178.
- 36 Rustom Bharucha, *Terror and Performance* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 74–5.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 38 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 2.
- 39 Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 32–3.
- 40 Peter Hallward, 'Staging Equality: On Rancière's Theatrocacy', *New Left Review*, 37 (2006), pp. 125–6, emphasis in the original.
- 41 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009), p. 13.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 43 Andy Lavender, 'Viewing and Acting (and Points in Between): The Trouble with Spectating after Rancière', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22, 3 (2012), pp. 307–26, here pp. 325–6.

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