

Written for *Trickster*, 2023 (Collected essays by various authors, asked to explore an important, early influence.)

## **William Carlos Williams**

### **James Clifford**

In graduate school during the 1970s my research centered on the history of Anthropology and particularly on the modern discipline's defining methodology, "fieldwork." My dissertation and first book, *Person and Myth* (1984), focused on a missionary-ethnologist, Maurice Leenhardt, and his long engagement with the Melanesian people of New Caledonia, a brutal French colony. Writing about a scientifically-minded missionary committed to personal and social transformation expanded my definition of what could be considered proper "ethnography," It gave me a critical perspective on the synchronic fieldwork norms of post-Malinowski anthropology. Further research on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century French tradition also challenged my sense of the discipline's boundaries. *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) pulled together much of what I discovered in the intellectual/literary/artistic ferment of Paris between two World Wars. Scholars like Marcel Mauss, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Paul Rivet and Marcel Griaule participated in an "exoticist" milieu that included artists like Picasso and Max Ernst as well as literary figures like Michel Leiris, Georges Bataille, Victor Segalen, and Aimé Césaire. I won't go into the details here, but a key chapter, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," evoked a subversive form of cultural analysis that linked social scientific and avant-garde forms of "research." The chapter, both descriptive and aspirational, opened space for surprising juxtapositions (collage), fragmented narratives (poetics), epiphanies ("found" art/evidence), and subjective investments (dreams/reflexivity). This loosening of academic practice, also advocated in the co-edited volume, *Writing Culture* (1986), found a receptive audience at a time when established cultural authority was being widely challenged.

"Ethnography," in a newly expanded sense, was claimed by artists, writers, filmmakers and cultural critics, used in ways that we "postmodern anthropologists" could never have imagined. Before long, the vogue passed, but I think the openings it created are still generative. An ethnographic attitude--

attentive to local knowledges, to subversive energies, and to unexpected experiences--is more-than-ever crucial in a confusing, contradictory world.

In *The Predicament of Culture*, my account of this expanded “ethnographic” sensibility was largely based on my doctoral research in European, mostly French, contexts. But there were American sources as well. The book ended with an extended report from a trial in Boston--which I attended by chance--about the land rights of Wampanoag Native people still living, surviving and changing, on nearby Cape Cod. A fractured, inventive history, unknown to me, this reality was mirrored in a poem which launched the book. “To Elsie” evokes the disturbing presence in a New Jersey doctor’s home, around 1920, of a mixed-race, working woman of uncertain, possibly indigenous, background. This abject figure shatters the doctor’s complacency about where America is going. The poem ends by imagining a careening, driverless car, a feeling that is certainly familiar today.

The author of that poem, William Carlos Williams, is the formative influence I would like to recognize in these few pages. He, along with another Williams, (Raymond), who I don't have space to discuss, were authors I was actively reading in graduate school. One was an eclectic, experimental writer in search of an American speech, the other a socialist cultural critic rooted in the Welsh border country. Off-center in their different ways, I now see how they prepared me for the “ethnographic surrealism” I discovered, or concocted, from French materials.

William Carlos Williams famously chose America, rejecting Europe's attraction for his generation (Ezra Pound, an old friend, and T.S. Eliot, a *bête noir*). His home base was not the emerging cultural center of New York, but a small place nearby, the town of Rutherford New Jersey. There, over four decades, he practiced as a family doctor and obstetrician.

Noticing:

*Between Walls*

*The back wings  
of the*

*hospital where  
nothing*

*will grow lie  
cinders*

*in which shine  
the broken*

*pieces of a green  
bottle*

(*Selected Poems*, 1963: 37-38)

(Another kind of “pastoral?”)

And listening:

*I bin nipped  
hundreds of times. He never done anybody any  
harm .*

*“Or, Geez, Doc, I guess it’s all right  
but what the Hell does it mean?”*

(*Paterson*, 133, 114)

In his *Autobiography* (1967) Williams described a doctor’s work:

*The actual calling on people, at all times and under all conditions, the coming to grips with the intimate conditions of their lives, when they were being born, when they were dying, watching them die, watching them get well when they were ill, has always absorbed me. (356)*

*Day in day out, when the inarticulate patient struggles to lay himself bare to you, or with nothing more than a boil on his back is so caught off balance that he reveals some secret twist of a whole community's pathetic way of thought... (359)*

A kind of research:

*It is when we see, by this constant feeling for a meaning, from the unselected nature of the material, just as it comes in over the phone or at the office door, that there is no better way to get an intimation of what is going on in the world... We catch a glimpse of something, from time to time, which shows us that a presence has just brushed past us, some rare thing—just when that smiling little Italian woman has left us... (360)*

The old-fashioned physician and modernist poet, making home visits at all hours, struggling to balance medical objectivity with passionate identification, recording notes of what he sees and overhears, reminded me of the anthropological participant-observer. The writing that emerged from this work took the form of both poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction. In the 1970s, while I was thinking about socio-cultural anthropology and fieldwork, reading Williams helped me to expand and problematize ethnographic practices that could no longer be seen as the property of an academic discipline. He exemplified a different kind of “empiricism,” a receptivity to the unscripted fact or expression, the surprising presence or emergence. I saw that feeling and analysis could, and must, coexist if understanding was to be more than discovering what we already know. Description for Williams was always “thick,” as Clifford Geertz put it in 1973. And it was more than interpretation: even the simplest observation could release a visionary, allegorical content.

*The Poor*

*It's the anarchy of poverty*

*delights me, the old  
yellow wooden house indented  
among the new brick tenements*

*Or a cast iron balcony  
with panels showing oak branches  
in full leaf. It fits  
the dress of the children*

*reflecting every stage and  
custom of necessity—  
Chimneys, roofs, fences of  
wood and metal in an unfenced*

*age and enclosing next to  
nothing at all: the old man  
in a sweater and soft black  
hat who sweeps the sidewalk—*

*his own ten feet of it—  
in a wind that fitfully  
turning his corner has  
overwhelmed the entire city.*

*(Selected Poems, 110-111)*

It was the shorter poems that inspired me: the luminous observations, passageways to small alternative worlds (not to the “spiritual” or the “universal”). “No Ideas but in things,” Williams’ well-known slogan, threw Descartes and much European philosophy out the window. His realism was not naturalism, or a form of documentary, or a search for ideal types or social facts. It was a continuous receptivity, watching and listening for what exceeds the worlds we accept without question. Rather than

relying on the great artists and intellectual traditions that inspired Pound and Eliot, he listens to “the girl who comes to me, breathless, staggering into my office, in her underwear a still breathing infant, asking me to lock her mother out of the room; the man whose mind is gone—all of them finally say[ing] the same thing. And then a new meaning begins to intervene...a new more profound language...poetry.” (361)

The found poetry Williams is seeking emerges from what people say and do, from the gestures he encounters. In one short story, “Ancient Gentility” (collected by Robert Coles in *The Doctor Stories*, 1984) the luminous moment is an old Italian man’s wordless offer of a snuff box, a human connection without any shared language. More often, Williams is listening for spoken words, as they slip, or stagger into some unexpected meaning. The language is not the “English” of established culture or university departments, but an everyday American idiom. This bias toward the demotic, listening for casual utterances and exchanges, recognizing how they subvert conventions and make new meanings, seemed to me then, and still does, a defining feature of any non-reductive, more than merely descriptive ethnography.

In graduate school I was reading *In the American Grain* (1933): studies of literary and historical figures illustrating a distinct, New World experience and idiom. (A half-century later, I can see better the book’s Whiteness—for example how Black and Indigenous Americans, while occasionally celebrated, have no voice.) I was also grappling with Williams’ epic, *Paterson*, a poem composed over three decades that identified a city with a man (also named Paterson), a figure who was sometimes a character in the long poem, sometimes its author. Historical documents (many about Alexander Hamilton’s plans for an industrial center) and frequent excerpts from a letter by an anonymous woman (complaining of Williams’ coldness), intersect with poetic evocations of the city’s great waterfalls, picnickers in a park, a preacher, a burning library, and much else. Parts of the work are memorable, but the whole is unreadable, at least for me.

I did learn something from the work’s form: it’s open-endedness, and its strategy of collage. An experiment with non-holistic, multi-voiced, loosely articulated realism, it makes clear that functional, or typifying, or synchronic strategies for constructing “an ethnography” are leaky (the outside always finds its way in) and temporally unstable. Planned as four “books,” *Paterson* turned out to be

unfinishable (a sixth was in process when Williams died in 1963). This was no model, then, for a complete or even a coherent work; but it was an exposition of possibilities and limits for ethnographic multi-texts. It helped me see “ethnography” not as an empirical method leading to a monograph but rather as a disposition, or perhaps an attitude, that could take many shapes. This was good preparation for the 1980s when the authority of classic anthropological monographs was radically questioned by feminism, decolonization and textual theory.

During that same decade, an emerging neo-liberal hegemony was forming, and “globalization” was its order of the day. Opposition often took the form of defending endangered lifeways, protecting local cultures--necessary work, especially when it was engaged in community-based social movements, more than just attacking symbols like McDonalds. But resistance to globalization could sometimes feel like building fences in the ocean. “The local” had never been a circumscribed, or stable location or culture, essentially opposed to “the global.” (This discovery was explored in my book, *Routes*, 1998.) Williams’ localism, that of a writer fully engaged with modernism, but from an oblique angle, was “good to think with.” He certainly didn’t believe that being a family doctor among Italian and Polish immigrants in Rutherford New Jersey made his perspective in any way marginal. He was in touch with the great centers of art and culture: Paris, London, and increasingly New York. He frequented, by commuter train, the avant-garde milieu of Alfred Stieglitz and Co. He avidly followed Duchamp’s work... And he kept his distance.

In the *Predicament of Culture*, when I wrote, rather incautiously: “We are all Caribbeans now, in our urban archipelagos” (173), I was extrapolating from Aimé Césaire. But I could have been thinking of Dr. Williams. What about that middle name “Carlos?” I knew, then, that his family had a Latin American connection. Now, with some help from Reed Whitemore’s *William Carlos Williams, Poet from Jersey* (1975): 10-21, I see more clearly the complex “archipelago” in which his Americanness was rooted (and routed).

After the young Williams declared his independence from Europe, announcing that he was an “American poet,” his friend Pound (who was born in Idaho) wrote to him incredulously. “What the hell do you, a blooming foreigner know about the place.” Williams grew up in Rutherford, but among people who were from all over the map. His mother was part Martiniquan French, part Dutch, Spanish,

and Jewish from Amsterdam. She married an Englishman (possibly half Danish) whose work took him throughout Latin America. A formidable English grandmother had lived for years in several Caribbean islands before joining her son's family in Rutherford. Williams' mother didn't speak English very well, and neither did the immigrants whose utterances the doctor took as a source for his poetry. "To call them Americans, wrote Pound, is like calling them Martians, they were so ill-assorted, dissociated with the land and with each other." Yes. But heterogeneity was never a problem for Williams.

Always an outsider in the new America he championed, he violently rejected canonical ancestors like the Puritans. He embraced invention, voluptuousness, and impurity (the filthy Passaic River into which, in an early poem, the poet willingly plunged). This disposition rubbed off on me. I understood Williams as an "anti-essentialist" in the post-structuralist language of the '80s. I adapted the first line of "To Elsie" as the title for *Predicament's* Introduction, generalizing it: "The Pure Products [of America] Go Crazy." (And the Italians adopted this for the book title, bypassing an untranslatable word, "predicament.")

Williams would have been horrified by my appropriation of him as a proto-post-structuralist. He had no use for any academic theory, and was never a systematic thinker. Ideas were worldly things, in constant motion.

*from "A Sort of a Song"*

*Compose (no ideas  
but in things) invent!*

*Saxifrage is my flower that splits  
the rocks.*

*(Selected Poems, 108.)*

Williams' only stable concept of an American language was negative: it was *not* English-English.



Uninterested in well-formed or prestigious speech, he listened for what people actually said--an emergent, inventive vernacular. This disinclination to define, to circumscribe a “language” or a “culture,” was a positive value for me as I grappled, in the 1980s and 90s, with the entanglements of local places. I needed to recognize worlds-in-process. However, the author of *Paterson* was not concerned with the cultures of capitalism or global fields of force. (For this I relied primarily on Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall.)

Williams did explore, with sustained ethnographic attention, the dynamics of belonging, surviving, in the mixed, “peri-urban” social landscapes around Rutherford. Of course, similar socio-cultural archipelagos are now of great interest for post-exotic anthropologists. Two absorbing ethnographic works in this vein come to mind: Francesca Merlan, *Caging the Rainbow* (1998) and Aaron Fox, *Real Country* (2004): Australian Aboriginal and U.S. working class cultures in locations neither urban nor rural. The slash in “local/global” has been pried open in contemporary, multi-scaled, ethnographic writing (for example, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s brilliant *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2015). Ethnographic attention to places like these sharpens our peripheral vision: complex, interconnected, “marginal” worlds come into view.

William Carlos Williams gave me an early glimpse of off-centeredness as a critical value. Now I see this common thread linking the writers who have influenced me most. Joseph Conrad. His impossible, but real, rootedness in Britain (a struggle with Polish-French-English) was the subject of a book I began in graduate school that’s still unfinished. Raymond Williams. The son of a railway signalman in the Welsh borderlands lived and wrote just outside the intellectual center of Cambridge University, maintaining his distance. Stuart Hall. A Jamaican transplanted in Britain: he felt, and thought, as a “familiar stranger,” the title he gave to his memoir. Finally, Ursula K. Le Guin. I discovered her work in the process of my own de-centering, in 1978, from New York City to Santa Cruz, California. Over the years, I learned from Le Guin’s writing across several genres, much of it “ethnographic” in my expanded sense (See *Returns*, 2013, Chapter Five). Her principled advocacy for women and West Coast writers against the ignorance and parochialism of the New York literary establishment helped me grasp where I actually am now, on a different coast...

I owe a lot to these writers, beginning with William Carlos Williams. In their different ways they've shown me how to stay engaged, de-centered and connected, in changing, terrifying, times.