

## Keywords An Introduction

What is a keyword? The *Oxford English Dictionary's* primary definition is "a word serving as a key to a cipher or the like." In this usage, a keyword solves a puzzle, breaks a code, or unlocks a mystery. Or a keyword may be, in the *OED's* secondary definition, "a word or thing that is of great importance or significance," a term or symbol that organizes knowledge by allowing authors, book indexers, concordance makers, web designers, and database programmers to guide users to significant clusters of meaning. As these usages indicate, keywords are terms of great power and utility. Referred to in the field of information technology as "metadata" or "meta-tags," they sort through large quantities of print and digital information not only by providing quick access to specific content, but also by prioritizing and marketing some clusters of meaning and modes of contextualization over others.

When you look up a term in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, you will find that these technical definitions are both accurate and limited. Entries in this volume synthesize a great deal of information about the historical and contemporary meanings of many of the central terms that structure the fields of American studies and cultural studies; they provide contexts for the usage of those terms by discussing how their meanings have developed over time; and they may even unlock a few mysteries and break a few

codes. The volume serves, in this primary sense, as a snapshot of the dynamic, interdisciplinary, and cross-methodological research conversations that currently traverse the fields of American studies and cultural studies. But it would be a mistake to read *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* as a standard reference guide to an academic discipline. It is also designed to model a different kind of intellectual activity, and we intend it to provoke researchers, teachers, and students working across a wide range of intellectual formations to engage in problem-based forms of inquiry as they make claims about "America" and its various "cultures." Such inquiries differ from traditional academic research about "American culture" in two ways: they frame and pursue research questions that are explicitly responsive to shifts in contemporary political and social life; and they enable readers to think critically and creatively about how knowledge about "America" and its "cultures" has been, is, and should be made. *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* is, in this second sense, both a guide to some of the best existing research in and across the fields it maps and an argument for maintaining and enhancing a commitment to critical and interdisciplinary approaches to the future evolution of those fields.

Given these somewhat heterodox aims, it should come as no surprise that the immediate context for

our usage of the term “keyword” is one that reference books like the *OED* tend not to mention: the writings of the British cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams. Upon his return from World War II, Williams became interested in how the meanings of certain words, which he later called “keywords,” seemed to have shifted during his absence. The most notable of these keywords was “culture,” a term Williams saw as taking on very different significances in the academic spheres of literary studies and anthropology, and as anchoring new clusters of meaning through its interactions in popular discourse with neighboring terms such as “art,” “industry,” “class,” and “democracy.” Two publications that would hold great importance for the emerging field of cultural studies resulted from this experiential insight. The first, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1958), traced a genealogy of the complex and often contradictory mid-twentieth-century usages of the word “culture” back through nearly two centuries of writings by British intellectuals concerned with the antagonistic relations between political democracy and capitalist industrialization. The second, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), collected 134 short entries (151 in the 1983 revised edition), all of which gloss the shifts over the same two centuries in the meanings of terms ranging from “behavior” and “charity” to “sensibility” and “work.” As Williams explained in his introduction to the first edition of *Keywords*, he wrote these entries in his spare moments and originally conceived of them as an appendix to *Culture and Society*, but later developed them into a separate publication as their

sum grew in scope and complexity, and as he began to understand and articulate the methodological stakes of the project he had undertaken. *Keywords* is, Williams insisted, “not a dictionary or glossary of a particular academic subject. It is not a series of footnotes to dictionary histories or definitions of a number of words. It is, rather, the record of an inquiry into a *vocabulary*” (15).

The term “vocabulary” is in many ways the unacknowledged keyword of Williams’s introduction, and his use of that term can help us to explain how our *Keywords* volume works as well. He deployed it in order to distinguish his project not only from those of dictionary editors and glossary makers, but also from the work of academic philologists and linguists who examine the formal and structural components of language systems and their evolution. In contrast, Williams focused his keyword entries on what he called “historical semantics” (23), a phrase that emphasizes the ways in which meanings are made and altered over time through contestations among the usages of diverse social groups and movements. “What can be done in dictionaries,” Williams wrote, “is necessarily limited by their proper universality and by the long time-scale of revision which that, among other factors, imposes. The present inquiry, being more limited—not a dictionary, but a vocabulary—is more flexible” (26). This underlining of the flexibility of a “vocabulary”—as opposed to the universality of a “dictionary”—both points to Williams’s general premise that language systems develop and change only in relation to local and practical usages, and explains his

editorial decision to include blank pages at the end of his *Keywords* in order to signal that “the inquiry remains open, and that the author will welcome all amendments, corrections and revisions” (26). Like institutionally established academic methodologies and disciplines (philology and linguistics, in this case), dictionaries, glossaries, and other reference books reproduce a discourse of expertise by downplaying the creative, idiosyncratic, and unpredictable aspects of problem-based thinking and research. Like the forms of critical interdisciplinarity to which Williams’s own work contributes, vocabularies provide a counterpoint to this discourse of expertise. They treat knowledge not as a product of research that can be validated only in established disciplines and by credentialing institutions, but as a process that is responsive to the diverse constituencies that use and revise the meanings of the keywords that govern our understandings of the present, the future, and the past.

*Keywords for American Cultural Studies* shares a number of these fundamental premises with Williams’s volume, as well as its other successors (e.g., Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris 2005). It provides an accessible and readable introduction to some of the central terms and debates that shape the study of culture and society today. And it insists that those debates can be enhanced—rather than settled or shut down—by an increased understanding of the genealogies of their structuring terms and the conflicts and disagreements embedded in differing and even contradictory uses of those terms. To this end, we asked our contributors to address four basic questions as they wrote and revised

their entries: What kinds of critical projects does your keyword enable? What are the critical genealogies of the term and how do these genealogies affect its use today? Are there ways of thinking that are occluded or obstructed by the use of this term? What other keywords constellate around it? These questions were intended to spur our contributors to map the contemporary critical terrain as they see it developing in and around their keyword, and to ensure that a reader opening the book to any given entry could expect to encounter many of the same things: information about that term’s genealogy; a specific thinker’s take on the lines of inquiry that the term opens up or closes down; and links between the term and others in the volume or elsewhere. Attentive readers will note that individual authors responded in different ways to these prompts. Some entries are explicitly argumentative and polemical, while others are more descriptive and ecumenical. A few are willfully idiosyncratic, and several hint at implicit disagreements among the authors. Yet across all of the entries the reader will find scholarly writing that models critical and creative thinking, and authors who simultaneously analyze and evince the ways in which keywords are, as Williams put it, both “binding words in certain activities and their interpretation” and “indicative words in certain forms of thought” (15).

At the same time, there are several aspects of our *Keywords* that make it distinctive. Most obviously, it is a collaborative project involving more than sixty authors working across a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields that overlap with, but seldom map



neatly onto, either American studies or cultural studies. Most importantly, its exploration of culture and society is explicitly linked to a nation (the United States) or, at times, a geography (the Americas). The keyword “America” is thus central to the volume in two ways. First, the term in all of its mutations—“American,” “Americas,” “Americanization,” “Americanist”—needs to be defined in relation to what Williams called “particular formations of meaning” (15). “America,” in other words, is a category with particularizing effects that are as central to how we think about the possibilities and limitations of the field of American studies as the universalizing term “culture” is to our understanding of the shape of the field of cultural studies. Second, contemporary disagreements over the category’s field-defining function point toward a wide range of debates related to what is now commonly called the postnational or transnational turn in American studies. Just as the universalizing referents of Williams’s own project have been troubled by subsequent work in cultural studies that has rendered explicit his tendency to assume a narrowly “British” (largely white, working-class) readership and archive for that project (Gilroy 1987), the category “America” has been troubled within American studies in part through the field’s interactions with cultural studies, though more pressingly by its engagements with new “formations of meaning” emerging from shifting patterns of migration and immigration, existing and evolving diasporic communities, and the cultural and economic effects of globalization. The fact that nine of the words in this last sentence—“culture,”

“white,” “class,” “America,” “immigration,” “diaspora,” “community,” “economy,” and “globalization”—appear as keyword entries in this volume indicates how rich and complex this research has become.

In our editorial conversations with our contributors, we have attempted to draw out this richness and complexity by insisting—as Kirsten Silva Gruesz does in her entry on “America”—that authors specify when they are talking about “America” and when they are talking about the “United States.” It is an editorial decision that has produced some interesting results. Nearly all of the entries reach across U.S. national borders to track usages of terms like “America,” “South,” and “West,” and across disciplinary formations such as political philosophy and social theory where terms ranging from “liberalism” and “democracy” to “secularism” and “religion” may be inflected in particular ways in the United States, but cannot be subsumed under either an “American” or an “Americanist” rubric. Similarly, terms that might from one perspective be viewed as a subset of American studies (or cultural studies focused on the United States) are consistently shown to have transnational histories and future trajectories. Entries on “African,” “Asian,” “mestizo/a,” “coolie,” and “white”—not to mention “diaspora,” “immigration,” and “naturalization”—all map cultural formations and develop lines of inquiry that are neither exclusive to the United States nor exhausted by historically U.S.-based fields such as African American or Asian American studies. Transnational understandings of these keywords push us to re-

imagine the political geographies of the United States, as well as the nation-based intellectual geographies of the institutions that study it. And they indicate the involvement of our contributors in a wide variety of critical interdisciplinaries, ranging from postcolonial studies to queer studies to community studies. One lesson taught by these relatively new intellectual formations is that attempts by traditionally nation-based fields such as American studies to contain “particularities” within a universalizing (U.S.) nationalism, no matter how “diverse” or “multicultural,” always leave something—and often someone—out of the analytical frame.

Faced with this inevitability, it is tempting to apologize for specific terms and perspectives we have failed to include. Many keywords of American studies and cultural studies do not appear in this volume, some due to oversights that reflect our own intellectual and institutional orientations, but most because we wanted the book to be affordable and portable. This second factor required that we pare our original list of 145 entries to the current 64, a vexing process, but one that allowed several clusters of meaning to surface even as significant terms vanished. Take as an example the keyword “individual.” A college student who in high school was exposed to the old saw that “American” (read: U.S.) culture is characterized by an ideology of “individualism” might at first be dismayed to find no entry for that term in this volume. But that student might then look for—or be guided to—terms closely related to the concept of individuality: most clearly “identity,” but also “interiority” and “body.”

From there, the student could move either to keywords that qualify and constitute individuality, such as “race,” “ethnicity,” “gender,” “sex,” and “disability,” or to keywords that name places and concepts within which “individualism” is contested and constructed, such as “family,” “religion,” “corporation,” “state,” and “city.” This line of inquiry could then bring the student to “public” and “community” for broader framings of the missing entry on “individual.” And the student might even end up reading the entry on “society,” remembering that a previous course had suggested that individualism is always in tension with social norms, though now reflecting more critically on that simplistic analytical framework. At this point, the student would have a much more nuanced understanding of what other keywords and concepts are necessary to map the relationship between “individual” and “society,” and would be prepared to launch a research project around the problem of the “individual” that had been enriched by the simple fact that the term itself does *not* appear in this volume.

We imagine that this hypothetical example will strike some readers as persuasive, while others will remain skeptical of our editorial choices. To both groups, we want to extend an invitation to become collaborators in keywords projects that extend beyond the covers of this book. We ask you to revise, reject, and respond to the entries that do—and do not—appear in this volume, to create new clusters of meaning among them, and to develop deeper and richer discussions of what a given term does and can mean when used in specific local and global contexts. While we

have not followed Williams's cue by providing blank pages for the reader's use at the back of our *Keywords*, we do want to offer the following, necessarily incomplete list of words about which we, as co-editors of this keywords project, would like to hear and read more: activism, age, agency, alien, anarchy, archive, art, black, book, bureaucracy, canon, celebrity, character, child, Christian, commodity, consent, conservative, country, creativity, creole, depression, desire, development, disciplinary, diversity, education, elite, equality, evolution, European, experience, expert, fascism, feminine, fiction, freedom, friendship, government, hegemony, heritage, heterosexual, history, homosexual, human, imagination, individual, intellectual, Islam, Jewish, justice, labor, Latino, liberty, literacy, local, masculine, management, manufacture, media, minority, mission, multicultural, Muslim, native, normal, opinion, oratory, patriotism, place, pluralism, policy, popular, poverty, pragmatism, psychology, radical, reality, representation, republicanism, reservation, resistance, revolution, rights, romance, security, segregation, settler, socialism, sodomy, sovereignty, space, subaltern, subjectivity, technology, terror, text, theory, tourism, tradition, transgender, translation, trauma, utopia, virtual, virtue, wealth, welfare, work.

This already too-long list could go on for pages, and even then it would be easy to conjure other possibilities. Whether keywords projects like this one take the form of classroom assignments, research and working

groups, edited volumes, or public forums, they must remain open to further elaboration and amendment not simply due to dynamics of inclusion and exclusion or limitations of time and space. Rather, their incompleteness is essential to any problem-based understanding of how research is conducted and how knowledge is made, both inside and outside of academic settings. Claiming the ability to map complex fields of knowledge while also maintaining a critical approach to how the problems that constitute those fields are—and should be—framed requires both intellectual modesty and an openness to further collaboration. One response to this modesty and openness is critique. We welcome this response, and we also want to encourage all of our readers to react by making something new, whether that thing is as minor as a new conversation or classroom assignment or as major as an edited volume, digital archive, or public initiative. The true measure of the success of *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* will be its ability to clear conceptual space for these future projects, as scholars, teachers, and students develop new and challenging research questions in dialogue with others who may not quite share a common vocabulary, but who do know something about where conflicts and debates over meaning come from, why they matter, and how they might matter differently in the future. We look forward to reading and hearing about the results of these inquiries.