

Mikaela Blount

Professor Borcoman

ENGL 210

4 May 2025

Coffee, Classes, and Culture

How would you describe a well “cultured” person? Do they visit galleries once a week? Take a European vacation each year? Or do they have an intensive book collection, hugging each wall of their pre-war building? They probably wear glasses and drink their coffee black, no cream or sugar, of course. Most of all, are they rich to the point they have accessed this lifestyle where they can devote themselves to the exclusive arts?

For so long, being “cultured” has been packaged to appeal mainly to intellectual elites and the upper class. Oh, you would like to see a painting by a legendary artist who probably could not afford rent back then? That will be thirty bucks to step into the museum, thanks. But who decided culture can only be observed like that? We have seen beautiful brush strokes of famous rich figures, but what about the everyday person? Culture is everywhere. There is culture to be explored on your walk to class. On your busy commute to The Big Apple. Welsh writer and scholar Raymond Williams explores this very idea in his essay “Culture is Ordinary” (1958).

Williams’s argument that culture is deeply rooted in everyday life can be applied to the rich and often overlooked culture of college students. Far from being a product of intellectual

elites or the upper class, college students create and shape a vibrant culture through their daily experiences, interactions, and expressions, proving that culture thrives in all walks of life.

Wake up at the crack of dawn. Throw on the standard uniform: simple top, loose jeans. Add some accessories and shoes that say, “I might have somewhere important to be,” because looking important while navigating The Big Apple is key, apparently. Set on the thrilling ten minute drive to the train station, followed by the fun game of “find parking.” Shuffle onto the platform with the tailored suits and their pointy shoe companions, clearly my people. Grab a seat on the train, ideally next to someone loudly saying “I’m more important than you” through the clattering of their keyboard. Enjoy the anxiety inducing sound of your ticket scan. Almost an hour of excitement later, get off and travel up the stairs, skillfully dodging someone’s scooter because messing up this meticulously applied makeup would be a tragedy. Dash through the human maze towards the next train. Grip the communal pole (germs build character, right?).

Finally, freedom from the musty train cart. Get off, again. The suits are replaced by the high fashion of sweatpants, Uggs, and headphones. Struggle uphill, avoid the decorative trash cans while daydreaming living in a Harlem brownstone. Flash your ID at the uninterested security guard. Now, the closing scene. Walk up the six floors because obviously the escalators are out of service... for months now. Finally, gasp your way into a classroom seat.

Congratulations, you have just experienced the glamorous culture of student travelling to class.

Culture is not always loud or defined by ceremonies and food. It can be as simple and thoughtful as a group of people gathering to learn under one roof. In the classroom, culture is the subtle interactions, the shared laughter over a group project, the tense debates that lead to dismissal, the quiet support between your peers navigating unfamiliar territory. It is the collective energy of everyone, each with their own stories, dreams, and struggles. All who bring vibrancy

and life to an ordinary space. In these learning environments, especially in diverse academic communities such as The City College of New York (CCNY), culture becomes a foundation for international perspectives, unique traditions, and, most of all, fresh ideas. It is truly these ordinary people who make up this culture. As Williams puts it, “Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings” (6). He emphasizes that culture is not for the exclusive or elites, instead it is ingrained in the everyday lives of all people. Just like students gathering in a classroom, culture is formed by regular, shared practices and values within a community.

Williams’s argument that culture is rooted in everyday life supports the idea that college students actively create their own meaningful culture. He rejects the belief that culture only belongs to the elite, stating, “...to go on to say that working people are excluded from English culture is nonsense; they have their own growing institutions, and much of the strictly bourgeois culture they would in any case not want” (6). This reinforces the view that culture is not this trophy bestowed by intellectuals, but a system lived and shaped by people in their own contexts. Similarly, college students build culture through shared experiences, whether it is navigating campus life, forming support systems, engaging in activism, or expressing their identity. These everyday practices demonstrate that culture thrives far beyond the restrictive traditional power and prestige.

At first glance, college culture might seem mundane. From routine lectures, packed libraries, to students hurrying between classes. But Raymond Williams urges us to rethink what we consider “ordinary.” He writes, “Culture is ordinary, you should not have to go to London to find it” (15). This statement resonates with my experience at CCNY. It reminds us that culture is not reserved for elite institutions or curated spaces, instead it is created in the everyday

interactions, struggles, and aspirations of people, especially students like us. Williams also argues that "...there are no masses to save, to capture, or to direct, but rather this crowded people in the course of an extraordinarily rapid and confusing expansion of their lives" (18). That line captures exactly what I have seen on campus, students navigating pressures, identities, and responsibilities while still choosing to raise their voices against injustice. College, in Williams' terms, is not a detached academic bubble, it is a living culture in motion, full of individuals shaping their world in real time. Education here is not passive, rather an active force for democratic change.

Williams also encourages that we should not expect people to accept culture blindly, writing, "To take our arts to new audiences is to be quite certain that in many respects those arts will be changed" (15). At CCNY, I have seen students constantly questioning what they are taught, pushing back, reinterpreting, and creating something new from it. That spirit of resistance and redefinition is not a flaw of our academic community, it is a sign of its strength. Williams would likely see this as the right direction for cultural growth: dynamic, participatory, and unpredictable. Even in small moments when students share notes, support each other through mental health struggles, or organize tutoring sessions after class, we see Williams' vision of a shared, evolving culture. He argues that "...we are talking about a method of common payment, for common services" (12). That is exactly what I see at CCNY every day, people contributing to a collective experience that helps us all rise. Williams challenges us to take seriously the meaning of ordinary life and by his standards, the culture at CCNY is anything but ordinary. It is a place where meaning is constantly being made, voices are being found, and futures are being built together.

Most of us come from humble beginnings. Whether you are from the Heights up above, Flatbush down below, or just across the Hudson, we all make our way here to learn, to grow, and to become something more. We bring with us our families' hopes, our neighborhood stories, and, of course, our personal dreams. College culture, especially here in the heart of New York City, is shaped by this incredible mix of backgrounds and voices. Raymond Williams was right, culture is ordinary, but what we are doing is nothing short of extraordinary. From activism and ambition to shared lecture notes and quiet support, college students are constantly building something meaningful together. This culture is not reserved for the elite. It is created by us, ordinary people, living with a purpose. And in doing so, we remind the world that culture is not just something we inherit from our families, but also something we live. Anyway, same time tomorrow? Meet you at the café for coffee after class.



Citations:

1. Williams, Raymond. "Culture is Ordinary." 1958