The Here and Now of Cultural Studies

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1. Introduction

In recent years, we have repeatedly been alerted to the apparent decline of cultural studies. Writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2009, Michael Bérubé, for instance, argued that cultural studies had not only “lost its bearings” but, even worse, that it had not had “much of an impact at all” (2009). While granting that the field made some inroads into English departments, Bérubé describes its effect on other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, economics, political science and international relations as negligible. So negligible, in fact, that “you might as well be asking about the carbon footprint of unicorns” (*ibid.*). While singular in its polemical stance, Bérubé was by far not alone in his scepticism. The late Stuart Hall once said that the field “contains a lot of rubbish” (Hall qtd. in Taylor 2007) and openly declared his unwillingness to “read another cultural-studies analysis of Madonna or *The Sopranos*” (Hall qtd. in MacCabe 2008: 29). In the most recent iteration of this crisis discourse, titled *What’s Become of Cultural Studies*, Graeme Turner laconically observes that “the whole field is clearly going to the dogs” and poses a set of polemical questions:

> When we go to a cultural studies conference, is it packed with interesting papers doing challenging things in the service of a common intellectual project? Or are they more likely to be wearily predictable, with many of the same old theoretical vehicles, albeit fashionably customized to their owners’ personal tastes, being driven around small sectors of familiar terrain? […] A little harsh, you think […] or […] depressingly familiar? (2012: 3-4)

It is striking how persistent these and similar complaints – about cultural studies’ assumed lack of political relevance, its alleged jargon-driven writing or a supposed absence of disciplinary and methodological grounding – really are. They are voiced with great regularity and are most often concerned with the role of popular culture in cultural studies scholarship (cf. Frow 1995; Grossberg 1989, 1995; McGuigan 1992; Sardar & Van Loon 1996).

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1 We thank Elisabeth Wood for her thorough proofreading as well as the editors and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments.
1997: 169-170). As early as 1986, Judith Williamson, in *The Problems of Being Popular*, argued against “an uncritical understanding of youth cultural consumption” (1986). Four years later, Meaghan Morris would famously warn fellow academics against “banality in cultural studies” (1990) and Simon Frith would call on cultural studies scholars to save “popular culture from the populists” (1991). And while in 1992 Australian scholar Tony Bennett complained about his colleagues’ “sleuth-like searching for subversive practices just where you’d least expect to find them” (1992: 32), Hall, at this stage, had also reached a state of exasperation, observing that “anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we’ve been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything” (Hall 1992: 285). Summarising the situation for the UK in the mid-1990s in his essay “So-called Cultural Studies. Dead Ends and Reinvented Wheels”, David Morley concluded that

we have recently witnessed a series of attacks on the overall project of cultural studies [...]. The critiques variously argue that cultural studies has led us into a political ‘dead end’ (in particular, in its emphasis on the study of cultural consumption); has abandoned ‘politics’ altogether (at least, in one definition of the term); [...]. In these critiques it is argued that it is (somehow) both time to move ‘beyond’ cultural studies altogether, and time to return to the more secure disciplinary foundations and rigorous methodological procedures of sociology, and/or political economy and anthropology. (1998: 476)

In our eyes, it would be wrong, however, to take these early criticisms as indicative of a fundamental flaw that has haunted cultural studies from the outset. They are better understood as resulting from the field’s particular genealogy. Cultural studies scholars, in the 1980s and 1990s at least, understood their work not in terms of a clearly defined set of practices, methodologies and subject matters, but rather as a diverse array of academic practices always in the process of remaking itself. “Cultural studies”, in Lawrence Grossberg’s words, “has always been changing. [...] This is possible, even necessary, precisely because it matters to cultural studies itself that the field remain open, with competing questions, projects and positions.” (1993: 1) And it was precisely this open-endedness that produced a considerable body of critical work “explicitly devoted to (re)mapping the shape of the field” (Rodman 1997: 58). This critical self-examination insisted upon by cultural studies scholars (cf. Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler 1992: 3; Hall 1992: 278; Rajan 2001: 70; Stratton & Ang 1996) has meant that discussions about what constitutes good and bad practice have characterised cultural studies from the outset.
While pronouncements of crisis have stayed with us, we believe that the situation today is unlike that in the 1980s and 1990s when pivotal questions – “What is cultural studies?” and “What should cultural studies be?” (Rodman 1997: 57) – were hotly debated together with disputes about the standing of cultural studies within or alongside established disciplines. After all, the first two generations of cultural studies scholars had emerged from traditional disciplines and made it their goal to reject disciplinariness, conceiving of cultural studies always in the plural: “Cultural studies”, argued Hall, “is not one thing. It has never been one thing.” (1990: 11) For better or worse, participants in the current debate appear to have moved on from such an insistence on multiplicity. Their understanding of Cultural Studies (now often writ large) is that of a field that “has become substantially institutionalized” (Smith 2011b: 3; cf. also Turner 2012: 7-8), and they express a renewed urgency to reach a consensus as to what constitutes the discipline. In this vein, Graeme Turner, for instance, nominates a range of “core” characteristics that he takes to define “what matters about cultural studies” (2012: 12). Among these he names the field’s intrinsic interdisciplinarity, its shared body of theory, its interest in “the cultural distribution of power” and, finally, its commitment to the public good (ibid.: 6).

Such attempts at defining the field’s core concerns seem narrowly focused on an Anglo-American model of institutionalised cultural studies and bring with them their own difficulties. For one, the desired achievement of recognition as an academic discipline makes it increasingly unlikely for cultural studies to be part of oppositional knowledges (cf. ibid.: 8). Moreover, there exists a tension between the emergent or de facto disciplinariness of the field and the intrinsic inter-, multi- or transdisciplinarity of most scholarship conducted under that label. An insistence on interdisciplinarity all-too easily glosses over the time-consuming work of cooperation and academic border crossings that goes into such projects; work that is rarely recognised by colleagues and funding bodies as it is. It is also ignorant of the sheer diversity of cultural studies traditions across the globe, of which the German-speaking context, from which we write, is only one example.

In German-speaking academia, cultural studies never achieved the same degree of institutionalisation as in the Anglophone world. Already at the initial Crossroads in Cultural Studies conference held 1996 in Finland, Austrian researcher Roman Horak contributed a paper “Cultural Studies in Germany (and Austria): and Why There is No Such Thing” (1999). Much has changed in the meantime, and yet Horak’s early verdict continues to ring true, as it remains impossible to speak of German cultural studies as a unified field (cf. Horak 2002). German-language practitioners of cultural studies are situated across a range of disciplines such as
sociology, media and German studies as well as in other philologies (cf. Göttlich 2013; Hepp & Winter 2008b: 15-16; Schwer 2005). By far the greatest number, however, work in English and American Studies departments where, in the 1990s, cultural studies slowly came to replace what had formerly been area studies [Landeskunde] (cf. Berg 2001). While this reflects the ongoing reception of British, American and, to a lesser extent, Australian cultural studies traditions, there simultaneously exists a local tradition of Kulturwissenschaft, which goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century and thinkers such as Georg Simmel, Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin and Ernst Cassirer. Like cultural studies, Kulturwissenschaft was re-established as an academic (analytical and distinctly not political) discipline in the 1990s with a pronounced focus on media (cf. Assmann 2012: 23-28; Böhme, Matussek & Müller 2000; Frühwald et al. 1991; Graevenitz 1999; Winthrop-Young 2006). The relationship between both fields remains fraught with difficulty (cf. Göttlich & Winter 1999; Mikos 2008; Musner 1999).

Hence, while the discourse of crisis that Bérubé invokes might not overlap with the discussion about the status quo of cultural studies in Germany, unease with the current state of affairs seems apparent here as well, and is notable in a range of recent conferences that address this topic. Among these are a 2014 conference on “Das Unbehagen an der Kultur/Culture and its Discontents” (Unbehagen 2014) and the 2013 annual conference of the German Association for the Study of British Cultures, where this paper was first presented and which called for an inquiry into “Cultural Studies and Its Discontents” (Britcult 2013). In 2012 the three of us had hosted an event with a similar focus called “Quo Vadis Cultural Studies” at Humboldt University Berlin in collaboration with the University of Potsdam which invited cultural studies scholars across the disciplines and from around Europe to share their views on “the status quo and possible futures of cultural studies between crisis and renewal” (Quo Vadis 2012). This conversation was continued in 2014 in a second workshop called “Rupture Dynamics. Interrogating the Here and Now of Cultural Studies”, which we organised together with our colleague Gudrun Rath at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Konstanz (Rupture 2014). What resulted from these challenging interdisciplinary conversations was a renewed interest in the ‘here and now’ of cultural studies, understood as a self-reflexive return to materiality – the subject of this article. We regard this (re)turn to materiality as more urgent than the mentioned attempts by leading scholars in the field to determine the disciplinary status of cultural studies.

2 We document these activities on a joint blog: https://criticalhabitations.wordpress.com.
One might object and ask whether this is not exactly how cultural studies began. After all, since its inception in the Birmingham Centre 50 years ago, cultural studies has been concerned with the historical materiality of particular moments, places and conjunctures. This conscious preoccupation with a specific here and now, a concrete time and place, has recently been buttressed by the reinvigoration of a ‘classical’ cultural studies agenda in the UK, where economic depression and a politics of austerity have prompted the return to detailed and stimulating materialist critiques (cf. Bramall 2013; Hall, Massey & Rustin 2013). Yet, if one is to take seriously the demand for a return to materiality as the basis for political and conceptual innovation, this makes impossible any simple adaptation of a well-established canon of cultural studies to other contexts. A renewed and sustained focus on the ‘here and now’ of cultural studies, we argue, instead works towards de-linking, disrupting and de-totalising the grand narratives of the field that are currently produced in Anglo-American contexts. The following can only constitute a brief overview of recent developments that we find most fruitful and which are reflected in the ongoing research collaborations begun at the aforementioned Berlin and Konstanz workshops. While remaining committed to cultural studies as a dynamic political form of knowledge production in the humanities, we want to de-link cultural studies from its supposedly singular origin in Birmingham, drawing attention to regionally specific approaches and their challenges to some of cultural studies’ core concepts and methodologies; we engage with the disruptive potential queer and postcolonial critiques may bring to cultural studies’ commitment to emancipation and progressivist narratives; and we want to draw attention to the de-totalising impact of the recent interest in non-human agents and affects on a field so thoroughly committed to social causes and human actors.

2. De-Linking Cultural Studies

For the sake of brevity, our discussion of cultural studies’ status quo has thus far only focused on the particular North American, British and, to a lesser extent, German strands of the debate and ignored much of the diversity that characterises the field across the globe. Emerging from different linguistic, regional, national and diasporic contexts, and drawing on specific local traditions and methodologies, these local ways of doing cultural studies are forking increasingly distinct trajectories (cf. Abbas & Erni 2005). The success story of the internationalisation of cultural studies, as evinced among other things in the geographically diverse locations of past international Crossroads in Cultural Studies conferences in Istanbul (2006), Kingston (2008), Hong Kong (2010), Paris (2012) and Tampere (2014), brings with it its own complexities. While an interest in specific conjunctures has been central to the project of a located cultural studies
from the start, the resultant diversity of approaches, methodologies and subject matters has made it increasingly difficult to think of cultural studies as an integrated project. How does one reconcile the tensions that exist between a range of shared approaches and these diverse traditions? In addressing this question, this section opens up a more diversified understanding of the ‘heres’ and ‘nows’ of cultural studies that would ideally reflect back on practices in the West, creating an awareness that the current sense of crisis is a local phenomenon that pertains to very particular ‘nows’; that the Birmingham tradition constitutes only one of the many ‘heres’ of cultural studies; and that cultural studies would lose more than it gains if we prescribe a disciplinary ‘core’.

Two possible models for thinking about the relationship between an ‘originary’ or ‘core’ cultural studies and the current diversity of cultural studies practices across the globe were addressed in an interview that Taiwanese scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen conducted with Stuart Hall in 1992. Recorded at the tail end of a two-week long international conference titled “Trajectories: Towards a New Internationalist Cultural Studies” at National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan, both researchers offered different conceptualisations of the relationship between a British cultural studies tradition and the increasingly global and diverse field of practices now undertaken under this name:

SH: Cultural studies, in its earlier stage, was very much lodged in a ‘western’ project: a project of critique of the West, but nevertheless within a western intellectual and philosophical framework. What arises now are all the questions about establishing reference points for a new audience [...] formed in different traditions, in different relationships to ‘the West’. That’s a process of cultural negotiation [...]. What interests me about this is that, everywhere, cultural studies is going through a process of re-translation. It’s going through the process of retranslation wherever it is being taken up, in the United States, Australia, Canada, particularly. [...] In addition to that there is also a translation between generations, even within British cultural studies itself. Cultural studies now is in a very different position from how it was when the Birmingham Centre was going. [...] So I am struck by the fact that, in a way, internationalization poses problems on a bigger scale, but not different in kind, because translation has to go on, wherever practitioners appropriate a paradigm and begin to practise within it, transforming it, at the same time, in terms of their own concerns.

KHC: The new configuration seems to have left the ‘originary’ movement of British cultural studies, with everything now flowing in different directions. It seems ‘British’ cultural studies is no longer needed.

SH: Yes, sure. I understand declarations of independence of that kind, although I think they misrepresent what new conjunctions
are really about – they are never absolute ruptures, total breaks. (Chen 1996: 393-395)

For Hall, new academic traditions emerge out of a “process of re-translation” that characterises any attempt at updating academic projects to meet the demands of a new audience, be it removed by spatial or temporal distance from an earlier moment. Accordingly, he describes the difference between the re-negotiations that cultural studies in the 1990s was undergoing both ‘at home’ and abroad as one in scale, but not in kind. For Chen, it seems, this reply proves unsatisfactory. After all, the term translation continues to locate the origins of the discipline in Britain, thus according other traditions only secondary status. Chen, who would become one of the founding members of the Inter-Asia cultural studies movement, thus stressed the fact that “everything [was] now flowing in different directions”. In order to chart some of the complexities that come to light when one considers the notions of ‘re-translation’ versus ‘independent flows’, we would like to discuss two examples of cultural studies’ travels across the globe: Australia and Latin America.

The story of international cultural studies as a case study in re-translation has its starting point in the 1980s, when many cultural studies scholars fled Thatcher’s Britain and began to exert a profound influence on the humanities in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA (cf. Turner 2012: 126). This process was characterised by a number of ironies. For one, cultural studies’ “transplantations” have, as Ien Ang and David Morley pointed out, “often ironically echoed the original map of British imperialism’s conquest” (1998: 136). In the Australian case, which we would like to present in greater detail here, these ‘transplanted’ academics initially appear to have believed in a conceptual core, finding it difficult to remain true to the project of a cultural studies attentive to the specificities of local conjunctures. Morley and Ang refer to a contemporary publication of Screen, where the correspondent expressed his puzzlement about the “inordinate number of left academics wandering round Australia, but talking about Birmingham” (Francovits qtd. in Ang & Morley 1989: 136). Instead of committing themselves to a new ‘here’, the early Australian practice of cultural studies was characterised by a noticeable Anglo-centricity where the teaching, in particular, was “infested with readings and examples drawn from the UK” (Turner 2012: 126).

This UK influence receded by the early 1990s, when local work created a distinct national and international presence for Australian cultural studies, and it became the aim of researchers to develop a “locally inflected version of cultural studies” (ibid.: 128). In the process, scholars embraced cultural studies’ interest in “history from below” and a focus on the everyday as adequate tools for addressing local processes of identity formation. Coinciding with increasing cultural and political independence
from Britain, cultural studies thus became an academic project concerned with identifying “what is typical about Australia” (Hartley 2003: 124; cf. Denoon, Mein-Smith & Wyndham 2000: 432). Turner, reviewing this trend in the early 1990s, argued somewhat problematically that

White Australian histories [...] have, in a sense, always been histories “from below”: accounts of a subordinated (that is, a colonised) people, and of their construction of social groups and identities within an extremely repressive and authoritarian social and administrative structure (Turner 1992: 643).

In the context of such – retrospectively naïve – usurpations or the post-colonial stance by settler-descended Australians, popular culture became an object of study for a generation of scholars who took it to be expressive of the country’s national identity.

Expatriate scholar John Fiske was pivotal to this development. The role of this British academic in the early development of Australian cultural studies is an important reminder of the way in which the cultural studies diaspora had a considerable impact on the development of the field abroad. Fiske used his international networks to help develop new cultural studies teaching programmes at several universities, he set up the Australian Journal of Cultural Studies and initiated the contact of “key cultural studies publisher Routledge” with Australian-based authors (Turner 2012: 127). Fiske is important for our argument for another reason as well: his “Surfalism and Sandiotics. The Beach in Oz Popular Culture”, which appeared in 1983 in the first volume of the Australian Journal of Cultural Studies (Fiske 1983) and which was reissued in the seminal 1987 book Myths of Oz, written jointly by with Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner (Fiske, Hodge & Turner 1987), is often regarded as one of the founding texts of cultural studies with an antipodean inflection. And it is an example of the identitarian turn that the field underwent in these years. After a close reading of specific Western-Australian beach dynamics at the Perth beach of Cottesloe, Fiske’s study undertook a move that was to become characteristic for Australian Cultural Studies’ engagement with popular culture in general. Investing the beach with significance beyond the local narrative, Fiske’s essay transformed the specific dynamic of Perth’s beach into the beach and turned their analysis into a pre-text for a meditation on an Australian sense of self.

While cultural studies’ re-translation down under thus fostered the emergence of a specifically Australian set of concerns and practices, the story of Australian cultural studies is not without its problems. In particular, the nationalism underwriting this project remains questionable. The relentless iteration of difference from the British tradition that followed the initial phase of mere reproduction often produces, as Stratton and Ang have shown, a speaking position that entails “its own silences and
limited horizons” (1996: 380), for instance, with respect to the situation of more recent migrants or of the continent’s indigenous peoples. Building on this criticism, the past two decades have seen new approaches gain ground. These approaches produce work that distinguishes itself by its political commitment to and epistemological dependence on the new ‘here’ and ‘now’. We are thinking in particular about fictocritical engagements with Australia’s colonial past, as evident in the work of Paul Carter, Ross Gibson, Stephen Muecke and Katrina Schlunke.

The emergence of cultural studies traditions as “independent flows” irrespective of an alleged British centre is even more evident in the case of Latin America. Accordingly, the editors of a 2012 special issue on cultural studies in Spanish-speaking Latin America provocatively begin their piece with the claim that “[p]erhaps, in some sense, it was for the better that Cultural Studies at Birmingham […] had its doors closed back in 2002”. They go on to assert that “Cultural Studies may have died there, but it lives on elsewhere (Lobo, Cedeño & Rutter-Jensen 2012: 1). Picking up on Bérubé’s damning assessment of the field’s increasing irrelevance, from which we quoted in our introduction, the editors observe the reverse trend for Spanish-speaking Latin America, evinced, among other things, by the institution of a number of successful post-graduate degrees at leading universities. This confident assertion of an identifiable Latin American tradition of cultural studies might come as a surprise to some members of the international cultural studies community, and it continues to cause concern for a number of Latin American intellectuals. After all, Latin American scholars had long refuted endeavours to institutionalise an internationalised cultural studies in the Association for Cultural Studies (cf. Turner 2012: 123), fearing that the region’s long tradition of cultural and materialist analysis would become subsumed, and ultimately abandoned, under a hegemonic metropolitan Anglo-Saxon rubric. As Nelly Richard, a prominent critic of cultural studies’ expansion into Latin America argued in 2005:

Los estudios culturales (cultural studies) son hoy la novedad exportada por la red metropolitana centrada en Estados Unidos, y existen muchas discusiones en América Latina sobre los riesgos de transferencia y reproducción periféricas de su modelo. Los estudios culturales no sólo remiten en su designación al antecedente de un proyecto cuya circunstancia internacional es ajena a la tradición latinoamericana, sino que además revisten la imagen de un paquete hegemónico debido al exitoso grado de institucionalización académica que hoy exhiben desde Estados Unidos. Son muchas las sospechas y reticencias que rodean a la mención a los estudios culturales en América Latina, donde se los tiende a percibir como demasiado cautivos del horizonte de referencias metropolitanas que globaliza el uso y la vigencia de los términos puestos en circulación.
por un mercado lingüístico de seminarios y de congresos internacionales. (Richard 2005: 481-482)

In the very same issue that set out to celebrate the institutionalisation of cultural studies in Latin America, Daniel Mato similarly worried about the power dynamics implied in this process and cautioned that “the voices that have more power to establish what this field is [...] work in the context of the American, English and Australian academic institutions or in some sort of relationship with these” (qtd. in Villoria Nolla & Cedeño 2012: 131).

So why would Latin American scholars want their academic project to be understood as cultural studies? For one, the argument is pragmatic: “Cultural Studies has taken off in Latin America because it has been recognized as an admittedly mixed but terribly useful bag of critical tools” (Lobo, Cedeño & Rutter-Jensen 2012: 3). Bundling together “classical thinkers of the Latin American national question, the indigenous question, of the relation of literature to culture and power, to race and ethnicity, in Latin America” with critics like Hall, Grossberg, Bennett, Haraway, Latin American cultural studies has developed new approaches to the “understanding – and chang[ing] – of social reality in Latin America” (ibid.). Writing from Ecuador, Catherine Walsh identifies another reason for cultural studies’ growing significance in the conscious decision “to articulate critical work in the Andes with other places” (Walsh 2012: 116).

The work that is currently emerging proves that this articulation of Latin American academic practices with ‘other places’ does not fall prey to the danger of a feared “dis-articulation of local intellectual collaborative networks” (Mato qtd. in Villoria Nolla & Cedeño 2012: 134). Rather, cultural studies in Latin America seems to be characterised by a sustained emphasis on the places of its enunciation and in situating processes of knowledge production, whereby place does not so much mean territory but instead “a position” (Santiago Castro-Gómez qtd. in Cedeño & Vil-

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3 Cultural Studies are nowadays the novelty exported by the metropolitan network centred in the United States, and plenty of discussions in Latin America exist about the risks of transferring and reproducing this model in the periphery. The designation Cultural Studies not only refers to the antecedent of a project whose international circumstances are alien to the Latin American tradition, but also conveys the image of a hegemonic package due to the successful degree of academic institutionalization achieved in the United States. There is much suspicion and reticence at the mention of Cultural Studies in Latin America, where they are generally perceived as too subject to the horizon of metropolitan references that globalizes the use and validity of the terms put into circulation by a linguistic market of lectures and international conferences. (Transl. Villoria Nolla & Cedeño 2012: 128)
loria Nolla 2012: 63) or “perspective” (Mignolo qtd. in Alvarez, Arias & Hale 2011: 232). Place has obtained this central significance, because there exists a strong sense of responsibility to local politics among Latin American intellectuals, who aim to actively fashion their scholarship to advance political goals (cf. Alvarez, Arias & Hale 2011: 242). Rooted in the social movements and struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, Latin American writing in the humanities has since been concerned with political and ethical as well as epistemological questions. While the first two of these issues are compatible with the Birmingham School tradition of politically committed knowledge production, we would like to foreground the third dimension of the Latin American project, since this emphatic interest in epistemological aspects distinguishes this variant of cultural studies from others (cf. ibid.: 235; Villoria Nolla & Cedeño 2012: 136). Granted, cultural studies in the Birmingham tradition has also shown some interest in epistemological questions, and Hall’s insistence on theory not “as the will to truth, but theory as a set of contested, localized, conjunctural knowledges” (1992: 286) is once again vital in this context. For Latin American cultural studies, however, the interrogation of knowledge production is more fundamental, and, to our minds, central to its endeavour. Building on the writing of decolonial thinkers such as Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Zulma Palermo, Arturo Escobar, Edgardo Lander, Catherine Walsh, Ramón Grosfoguel, Agustín Lao-Montes and others, such work proceeds from the insight that our presumably shared categories of academic enquiry are themselves products of the “occidentalist project of modernity” (Mato qtd. in Villoria Nolla & Cedeño 2012: 139). In seeking to de-link knowledge from this epistemological “zero point” of origin in the West (Mignolo 2007: 453), scholars seek out “the persistence, in the selfsame modern structures, of ‘other’ forms (not modern) of knowing the world” (Santiago Castro-Gómez qtd. in Cedeño & Villoria Nolla 2012: 68). In concrete terms this entails the realisation that indigenous and Afrodescendent political movements – in themselves innovative locations of contemporary cultural studies practice – are also epistemological interventions; a realisation that turns their consideration in academia from objects of study into co-producers of theory (cf. Walsh 2012: 113). The project of cultural studies in Latin America, in Walsh’s words, thus “concerns itself with the work of inverting the geopolitics of knowledge, with placing attention on the historically subjugated and negated plurality of knowledge, logics and rationalities (ibid.: 118).

In outlining different ‘translations’ as well as ‘independent flows’ in this section, we have sought to show how North American, British and German traditions of cultural studies constitute only some of the many ‘heres’ of cultural studies. Much can be gained, we believe, if scholars engage in a dialogue with cultural studies colleagues from other parts of the
globe, whose practices pose two fundamental challenges. Firstly, the epistemological concerns voiced by both Australian and Latin American scholars urge us to critically reflect upon the contingent, locally produced nature of cultural studies’ long agreed-upon concepts, methodologies and assumptions. And secondly, in drawing much of their critical edge from political practice, Latin American cultural studies confronts European, US and, for that matter, Australian academics with their increasing distance from such engagement.

3. Disrupting Cultural Studies

In addition to the multiplication of the location(s) – the ‘here(s)’ – of cultural studies, one can also detect an interrogation of its temporal frameworks – the ‘now’. Analyses of the present in cultural studies almost always rest on the commitment to social emancipation in the future. It seems obvious that future and futurity are central to any political project but it is precisely this subscription to social and political progress, the afore-mentioned teleological belief in “the public good” (Turner 2012: 6), that has been increasingly challenged, especially under the auspices of post- and decolonial critiques of modernity as well as queer and queer diasporic critiques of straight time which will be discussed in greater detail in this section. This turn to temporalities, however, can only be understood in the context of a more fundamental disruption of the categories of analysis in cultural studies. Most notably, the archetypical triad of race, class and gender has come under scrutiny in poststructuralist and antidentitarian frameworks such as queer studies and queer diaspora critique that are less based on fixed identity markers than on the questioning and disrupting of how identity comes to matter. While this has also been at the heart of the cultural studies agenda, the employment of these categories in institutional contexts, in textbooks and on syllabi, for instance, paradoxically seems to solidify rather than interrogate identity markers. This seems especially problematic if the focus is on ‘Other’ rather than hegemonic identities.

Robyn Wiegman traces the history of identity-based interventions into knowledge production such as women’s and gender studies and urges us to learn from the “objects” we study in her book *Object Lessons* (2011). Knowledge production is never objective or devoid of a political agenda. Wiegman looks back at the post-civil rights academy in the US and examines the animosities between gender studies and the related fields of ethnic and critical race studies as competing “identity knowledg-
es”4 centred on minoritarian self-representation. Tracing the dissatisfaction with such identitarian projects, specifically regarding the discussion of the category of ‘woman’, Wiegman describes the ways in which early feminism failed to systematically address differences within the category of woman. She discusses the emergence of gender studies from women’s studies, the ongoing critiques of women of colour and/or queer women (of colour) in the growing academic arena of gender studies. But rather than bemoaning the institutionalisation of identity knowledges, Wiegman emphasises that inevitable categorical disappointments also act as invigorating “object lessons” that can still be politically relevant. In this understanding, gender is not given precedence as an identity category, but put forth as a tool of critique that might take on contradictory meanings and political agendas in different contexts:

Whether it is deployed with affection or aggression, for analytic precision or autopoetic pleasure, with the force of discipline or for unabjected celebration, the critical pursuit of gender is premised on the political vision that defines it as a primary need. If feminist, queer, and trans inquiries currently provide the framework for conceiving the different but related stakes for the pursuit of gender, this does not mean that one is the truer, more accurate, more useful, more urgent account of gender than the others (though there will always be those who make such claims). Rather, from the vantage of Object Lessons, their multiple and contending ambitions underscore the political desires that shape the divergent answers they propose to a set of questions they mutually share. What, they all ask, is gender? What does it do? Who wants it? What does it animate or congeal? When does it fascinate? When does it do us in? (Wiegman 2011: 325-326)

Gender, according to Wiegman, is not simply a given category, but needs to be filled with meaning in critical usage and analysis where it can play out as

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4 All forms of “identity knowledges” are obviously also the target of a conservative and populist right. In Germany, we currently witness a massive anti-feminist backlash in mainstream journalism and a worrying harassment of gender studies scholars in social media. The German Gender Studies Association (Gender e.V.) and the German Sociological Association (GSA) have published statements condemning this form of hate speech and violence. Cf. http://www.fg-gender.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/stellungnahme_fg_gender_230714.pdf and http://www.soziologie.de/de/nc/aktuell/meldungen-archiv/einzelansicht/archive/2014/07/23/article/erklarung-der-deutschen-gesellschaft-fuer-soziologie-dgs-zu-aktuellen-kampagnen-der-diskreditierung (accessed 21 August 2014).
a social system, as a division of labor, as a structure of inequality; as a mode of dis/identification; as an occasion for sex; […] as a habit of thought, a terrain of recognition; a source of shame, a practice of pleasure, a language of being; […] in short, […] as the critical means to describe, inhabit, represent, embody, critique, applaud, and resist (ibid.: 326).

It is this disruptive potential into the linear narratives of identity categories as stable entities that supposedly lead to an ever-more progressive politics that might also benefit cultural studies and that is at the heart of queer theory’s interventions into the more positivist gay rights discourse. Historically, “queer” has been mobilized first and foremost as a verb, as an action taken: a queering of gender and sexual binaries. So from the outset queer has been active, connected to the wish to act (as in [the AIDS activism of the group] ACT UP, for instance), to call for action and to bring a new form of activism into being, one that is not centred on identity but rather addresses pressing issues, which could be as far-reaching but often also interconnected as, for example, medical care or right of residence. There has not been one set of people that it caters to exclusively. (Haschemi Yekani, Kilian & Michaelis 2013: 2-3).

How then do these critical conceptions of identity play out in the field of cultural studies at a time when queer studies seems to have made a particularly noticeable entry into the cultural studies circuit – evident, for example, in the large number of queer panels during the 2012 Crossroads in Cultural Studies conference in Paris?5 For Grossberg, in a move that at first sight evokes similarities with a queer agenda, the project of cultural studies is neither rooted in the privileging of a specific analytical category, nor is it a purely “theoretical” pursuit. He privileges the term ‘conjunction’ as the most prominent concept in cultural studies. But despite this seeming convergence, it is precisely the notion of temporality and liberation inherent in many forms of identity knowledges that seems to play out differently here. Rather than disrupting notions of (identitarian) emancipation, as queer theory attempts, Grossberg describes the main purpose of cultural studies as “understanding the present, to shape the future” (2010: 1). In response to the crisis discourse cited at the outset of this essay, he evokes the power of renewal. In stark contrast, most queer

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5 It might not be a coincidence that the explicitly anti-identitarian project of queer entered a productive liaison with cultural studies, while it has been less welcoming to more clearly identity-based projects, such as feminism. After all, Angela McRobbie remains one of the few prominent feminist voices in the field. Accordingly, Carol Stabile writes, “feminism’s entry into cultural studies was experienced as an intrusion – and an unpleasant one at that” (2011: 17).
theory in recent years, following among others Lee Edelman’s polemic *No Future* (2004), has decidedly turned against a political vision of a ‘better future’ – a development labelled the anti-social turn in queer theory (cf. Halberstam 2008). In other words, cultural studies still seems invested in a notion of a better tomorrow while queer’s anti-normative impulse follows the punk notion of ‘no future’.

Non-heterosexual/anti-normative life styles, the experience of early death or the plain refusal of linear narratives of ‘growing up and having children’ are analysed as queer temporalities. Scholars in this field have questioned a narrow preoccupation with the (heteronormative) present and employ wilful anachronisms to challenge modes of linear knowledge production (cf. Freeman 2010; Halberstam 2011; Love 2007). However, this should not be understood as a nihilist dismissal of politics altogether. Rather, queer theorists are invested in challenging the norms of ‘straight time’ as a heteronormative linear mode of managing subjects as governable consumers. Queer theorists like Jack Halberstam (2011) interrogate the political potential of failure rather than success or futurity.

A forceful second strand of disruptive critique emerges from decolonial and postcolonial frameworks that voice sustained criticism of cultural studies’ subscription to progressivist narratives. Critics, such as Arjun Appadurai (1996), Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992), and Mignolo (2009) challenge Western notions of modernity and progress. Paul Gilroy employs the terms “ruptured” (1993:160) and “non-synchronous” (*ibid.*: 174) to describe such a postcolonial historiography so as to disavow views that only ever understand non-European actors as belated arrivals to social struggles first fought elsewhere. Chandan Reddy summarises this debate on who counts as ‘modern’ succinctly:

> Haunted by the racialized social practices that enabled metropolitan prosperity, the category of the modern has abetted the mischaracterization of that prosperity as universal progress, thus displacing the contemporaneity of colonial social formations from its account of the modern and temporalizing the peripheries of the world system as non-modern. (2007: 162)

How can such criticism be made productive in the context of cultural studies’ continuing commitment to social emancipation? Here location and the critique of modernity need to be addressed in conjunction. In other words, how can the contemporaneity of diverse cultural studies traditions be understood in a way that does not simply situate them as a later addition to the ‘success story’ of the ‘original’ cultural studies? As the earlier discussion of Latin American cultural studies has shown, this also concerns the neoliberal economisation of the academy. Which knowledges travel and become relevant where at which point in time?
What is more, increasingly, academic knowledges partake in diasporic frameworks that resist easy national compartmentalisation. A diasporic cultural studies not only challenges the different locations of cultural studies, but the very idea of locating an academic discipline or tradition as such. This also disrupts the ways in which Anglophone and often transnational diasporic cultures can and should be studied in the still very national contexts of English and American Studies departments in Germany which increasingly also make it their mission to address exactly these transnational developments in the Anglosphere. This capacity to address transnational developments seems linked to what Grant Farred calls the “out-of-context-ness” of cultural studies (which thereby to a certain degree is in direct opposition to Grossberg’s emphasis of the importance of context as well as to the insistence on the ‘place of enunciation’ addressed in the previous section). Farred writes:

We might then say that cultural studies, like African American or ethnic studies, represents a perpetually dislocated, or diasporic, thinking. This is not the same, however, as suggesting that cultural studies always directly addresses the issue of the diaspora. (2011: 161)

But does this notion of “out-of-context-ness” glorify or romanticise the position of the (all too often mobile/privileged/cosmopolitan) migrant in the diaspora – as Farred concedes himself (cf. ibid.: 165)? The strands of cultural studies currently being developed in Asia and Latin America should not be misunderstood as naively investing in a local ‘grounded-ness’ that the diaspora has overcome. These critics, too, are interested in “pluritopic hermeneutics” (Mignolo 2003). Consequently, the focus on diaspora cannot simply be translated as an ‘unlocability’ that makes diaspora studies and cultural studies ‘natural’ allies, as Farred seems to suggest.

As a brief way to conclude this section and an attempt to read the queer and postcolonial/diasporic critiques together, we will focus exemplarily on the disruptive potential of queer diasporic analyses of art as one such inroad into a ‘disruptive’ cultural studies framework. In her analysis of Bollywood and South Asian diasporic cinema, Gayatri Gopinath challenges the heteronormative assumptions that all too often underlie the conception of diaspora, which is grasped as an extension of the ‘homeland’ and based on naturalised ideas of national allegiance and familial productivity. Her project is to unearth “impossible” queer female subject positions and desires in the diaspora that resist such logic. To begin such a queering of diaspora, Gopinath finds inspiration in the British tradition of cultural studies shaped by Hall and Gilroy. Gopinath expounds:
Theories of diaspora that emerged out of Black British cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s [...] powerfully move the concept of diaspora away from its traditional orientation toward homeland, exile [...]. This tradition of cultural studies [...] embraces diaspora as a concept for its potential to foreground notions of impurity and inauthenticity that resoundingly reject the ethnic and religious absolutism at the center of nationalist projects. (2005: 6-7)

So a queer notion of diaspora embraces the dislocation and inauthenticity of the frameworks of transnationality and belonging. However, Gopinath explains that, in order to queer diaspora, a non-reproductive queer temporality should be sutured to the diaspora understood as noncompliant with the transnational interest in neoliberal economies. She elaborates:

The category of “queer” in my project works to name this alternative rendering of diaspora and to dislodge diaspora from its adherence and loyalty to nationalist ideologies that are fully aligned with the interests of transnational capitalism. Suturing “queer” to “diaspora” thus recuperates those desires, practices, and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries. A consideration of queerness, in other words, becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora. (Ibid.: 10-11)

It is precisely this queer reading against the grain of identity and success imagined as temporal progress that may lend itself to a political reinvigoration of cultural studies. This is not a dismissal of earlier work by foundational thinkers such as Hall, but a return to the radical potential that their work offers. Rather than understanding queer’s turn to negativity solely as a rejection of any kind of futurity, then, the late José Esteban Muñoz has urged queer scholars to understand the “not yet” (Muñoz 2009: 1) as a realm of utopian possibility. In his book Cruising Utopia, he interrogates one of the most ephemeral of cultural forms – performance art – and considers the failure often attributed to such avant-garde practices to have a lasting effect. He writes: “Heteronormative culture makes queers think that both the past and the future do not belong to them. All we are allowed to imagine is barely surviving the present.” (Ibid.: 112) This utopianism is linked to “a failure to be normal” (ibid.: 172). Failing rather than succeeding is understood as a form of epistemological and political resistance. Queerness then is neither a liberatory goal that can be reached nor an emancipated identity that can be claimed (in the future). Rather, in the face of much adversity, “queerness is always in the horizon” (ibid.: 11).

Concluding from Gopinath’s and Muñoz’s deliberations, the productivity of queer diasporic frameworks and decolonial practices lies precisely
not in an expansion of ever more “national” traditions or schools of cultural studies. From a queer postcolonial point of view, we believe that cultural studies can be a disruptive transnational practice rather than subscribe to progress narratives. Cultural studies should resist the urge of further compartmentalisation which the emphasis on disciplinary cultural studies in authors like Turner and Smith seems to promote. To think about the categories and temporalities of cultural studies means to reflect on the limits of our analytical frameworks and their epistemological dependence on the locations of their emergence.

Despite the growing ‘heres’ of cultural studies described in the previous section, queer diasporic approaches more fundamentally disrupt notions of identity and location. Nonetheless, we believe that such disrupting queer critiques share with the more localised traditions a political invigoration of the field, precisely not in its disciplinary ‘taming’ into core characteristics or schools of cultural studies but a more fundamental epistemological critique of the very categories of analysis, be they temporal or spatial. Here then lies the potential of a truly counter-intuitive queer move that focuses more on a disruption of frameworks than on an ever-growing addition. Therefore, we would be hesitant to invest in a “future tense” of cultural studies (as Grossberg [2010] does). Rather, cultural studies, in this understanding, has the potential to continuously disrupt epistemologies of identity knowledges.

4. De-Totalising Cultural Studies

The current interest in speculative forms of knowledge production adds yet another layer of critique to our effort to de-link, disrupt and de-totalise cultural studies. In their emphasis on the agency of matter, approaches such as “object oriented ontology” (OOO) and “speculative realism” challenge a cultural studies traditionally centred on human actors and their (future) emancipation. Employing a quasi-ethnographic thick description that focuses on scenes rather than conjunctures, and the presence of non-human actants, these paradigms take a step back from the ambition to totalise. How does cultural studies approach such scholarship? Can considerations of objects and affects in their own right lead towards methodological reinvigoration? Or are they, to the contrary, indicative of a further weakening of political agency and historicity at a time of multiple – political, economic and environmental – crises?

The popularity of ontological approaches has sometimes aroused scepticism on the part of cultural studies scholars who are rightly wary of anything that smacks of essentialism and tend to focus on processes of signification (cf. Hemmings 2005). In contrast, we want to argue that ontology’s identification of new horizons for critique and social struggle has much to contribute to cultural studies today. More specifically, this sec-
tion asks how a renewed consideration of objects may interrupt linear conceptions of time and the progressivist narratives they frequently serve.

The shift away from the human subject as the primary or even exclusive actor of social exchange involves two main movements: the first is an enrichment of our conception of the object. Objects thus appear as co-actors and are endowed with an agency that is taken to extend to animals and mobile phones, worms, words and feelings. For agency to include *non-human* agency, action needs to be seen as *trans*-action, as moving through and between objects and bodies rather than inhering in *one particular kind of object*, an individual and coherent human subject. On the face of it, this should be a critical endeavour germane to most cultural studies scholars. After all, the discipline’s theoretical underpinnings, from Marxism to deconstruction and Foucauldian genealogy, all advocate a radical critique of liberal individualism. Acknowledging the human subject’s socio-cultural determination may cede ground to ideologies, institutions and other humans but usually stops short of a consideration of objects, affects and other non-human actors. That which is other than human, in fact, rarely figures in the emancipatory critiques and strategies of cultural studies. Such a glaring absence could potentially be traced to a theoretical climate that has long tended to conceive of political agency as lacking and emancipation as its recovery, or the consequence thereof. Given this often implicit assumption, the reconceptualisation of agency offered by OOO may be seen to threaten a further loss of agency. It could also be argued, however, that enriching our understanding of objects and the various relations they enjoy with each other discovers agency where before there appeared to be none and thus rethinks agency not as lack but as potential abundance. This being said, the investigation of non-human actors should not be taken to mean that all objects (including human objects) command the same degree of agency. Such a “flat ontology”, as Marcus Boon calls it, would conflate existing hierarchies and inequalities rather than contributing to their analytical description and critique (cf. Boon 2015). Cultural studies, we contend, stands to gain from entering a dialogue with new ontological philosophies, but only if it continues to practice a critique of objectifications that are not merely the result of our epistemologies but also the products of contemporary capitalism.

This leads us to the second movement central to OOO, which is methodological in nature: reading works like Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2010) or Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (2007), one is struck not only by the style of literary impressionism that they share but by the centrality of ethnographic method. Theirs is a thick description, an approach that seeks a richer experience of the object to establish new chan-

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nels of communication between subject and object – communication that is often formulated as caused by a circulation of affects giving rise to an atmosphere or mood. Diverse theoretical echoes notwithstanding, these studies can be said to follow a path signposted by Theodor Adorno. As Adorno argues in a late essay ([1969] 1998), the objective contents of experience are produced not by comparative generalisation but by the subject giving itself over to the object. This freedom allows the subject to (partially and momentarily) fade into the object, with which it is akin by virtue of its own objective being.

What are we to make of these aspects of the ontological turn – a broader conception of the object and quasi-ethnographic thick description – from a cultural studies perspective? In contrast to much work done in cultural studies, Bennett and Stewart distance their scholarship from the demystification of ideology critique. Theirs is not an interpretative ambition; somewhat counter-intuitively, they are less interested in what truly is, but what actors do. As we mentioned earlier, Grossberg has emphasised the term ‘conjuncture’ as central to the analytical tool kit of cultural studies. To the contrary, many authors interested in object ontology take a step back from the ambition to totalise: in a revealing choice of vocabulary, Stewart speaks not of conjunctures or even situations but of ‘scenes’. What she presents in Ordinary Affects is thus, in part, a series of fictocritical vignettes: the patient observation of everyday experience and an investigation into how it shapes our affective lives. Thus, in a short passage titled “Dog Days”, Stewart comes across a snapped electric wire on her morning walk and notes how “the dogs run around madly, as if re-charged” (2007: 9) before turning to a brief, and once again rather impressionistic, analysis of this episode:

> Everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have. But it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things. (Ibid.)

Evoking associations with theatre and film, the term ‘scene’ trades an explicitly political analysis of the present for its sustained perception – experience takes precedence over cognition. These differences notwithstanding, the political aims of Stewart and Bennett seem to be very much in line with the emancipatory goals of cultural studies. Bennett writes: “The figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption” (2010: viii). But whereas Bennett’s call for “a more distributive agency” (ibid.: ix) conceptualises such social transformation, Stewart’s impressionistic fragments of experience arguably remain caught in an attention to the object that runs the risk of reifying it once over. Here, Adorno’s caution that “the difference between
subject and object slices through subject as well as through object” (1998: 256) offers a useful reminder. In other words, both need to be thought of as interwoven.

In his *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Grossberg is surprisingly insistent on the importance of ontological theorising. Going against a long-standing taboo in the humanities that conflated ontological philosophy with Heidegger, and Heidegger with the horrors of National Socialism, it seems possible again to insist that ontology’s identification of new horizons for social struggle and critique has much to contribute to cultural studies. Grossberg also draws a useful distinction between cultural studies and ontological philosophy when he speaks of the necessarily historicising specificity of the former. Arguably, it is only through such conceptual mediation that the ontological presence of objects becomes a historical present. The fault-line between cultural studies and object ontology – at least these particular expressions of both – then lies less in a philosophical reformulation of ontological questions than in the analytical transit between the presence of matter and its concrete and historical present.

What, then, could a cultural studies take on object ontology look like? One successful example – although it is questionable if the author would think of her project in these terms – is Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011). Berlant’s interest lies in the object attachments that sustain our hopes for a better, or at least not a worse, future even when it has long since become obvious that no such stability is to be had. The political implications of Berlant’s investigation into the affects and objects that support ideologies of self-improvement are obvious: one example is our global inaction in the face of climate change and economic inequality, the way we desperately cling on to a status quo we clearly sense is doomed. Cultural studies critically engages with these topics, but the level at which Berlant approaches her subject is distinctive: what she puts on display are not narratives, fictions or ideologies but the affective economies whose circulation sustains emotional investment in dominant ideology, the objects through which feelings move and to which they attach themselves. Thus, she accords agency to elements of our social lives that often remain below the radar of cultural studies, and opens up new levels of our social lives to analysis.

It is here that critique makes an entry again. What Berlant describes is not only the continuation of the American dream, but its increasing disintegration. In itself such inability to imagine a better future does not indicate critical potential. Modern narratives of progress and today’s failure of the political imagination share their entrapment in what Walter Benjamin famously called “homogenous, empty time” (1969: 261). To return to an earlier part of our argument, our inability to take seriously the reality
of climate change may be due to our affective investment in the temporal fictions of progress and continuity, our ahistorical failure to comprehend catastrophe. Given this and similar current dilemmas, we might ask whether the horizon of future emancipation that subtends much work in cultural studies remains effective. It could be argued, for instance, that the protest movements of recent years, from Occupy to Tahrir Square, have been successful in their critique of the status quo but have largely failed when it came to popularising alternatives to this same state of affairs.

Perhaps a different route or tactic may be suggested at this point. This tactic would engage with the ontological turn to presence and remain firmly planted in the present. The term ‘object’ can be traced to the Latin “obicere”, meaning “to present” but also “to oppose” (Object 2014) – a connotation captured in the verb “to object”. Contemporary ontologies focus on the first meaning of the object, fashioning a new address that is sensitive to the object’s proper agency and vitality. If we keep in mind the second meaning, however, it becomes possible to imagine objects that oppose our construction of “homogenous, empty time” and the modes of production and consumption it enables. In other words, are there affects and objects that sabotage the continuation of our present, that deconstruct it from within? One example that comes to mind is the fate of North America’s suburban malls, many of which now stand partially empty or have been abandoned altogether. Seph Lawless’s photo book Black Friday. The Collapse of the American Shopping Mall (2014) vividly captures the broken arc of progress and its consumerist promises in large-scale still lives of shattered glass, deserted lobbies and rotting concrete. An unmistakable presence in suburbs or along highways, these malls remain visible to US society as harbingers of a future that refuses to be a continuation of the present.

Such a conception of the oppositional object may suggest the value of the ontological turn to queer theory and certain strands within cultural studies. Queer critiques of modern narratives of progress and cultural studies in Asia and Latin America converge in a potent interrogation of Western modernity. The challenges posed by an insistence on multiple locations and instances of the present are matched by an emphasis on the affective presence of matter and the agency of objects. Such approaches challenge cultural studies’ focus on the historical materiality of the present. In linking present and presence, we want to frame these two terms as inseparably in conjunction and open up a debate as to whether cultural studies can reconcile the seemingly universal(ist) ontological turn with the diverse local trajectories of cultural studies across the globe. We believe that the intersections of time and place, affect and ontology, politics and matter can help us address current shifts in cultural studies epistemology and challenge and expand its methods and concerns.
5. Conclusion

In this critical overview we have argued that the notion of ‘crisis’ that currently informs much of the debate around cultural studies is problematic for three more or less interrelated reasons. First, it may suggest one unitary discipline when we can indeed detect a global proliferation of different ‘flows’. Secondly, it is predicated on a genealogical success story of cultural studies that does not take into account decolonial and queer critiques of such linear narratives. And, thirdly, the current debate is yet to do justice to the challenge constituted by approaches that focus on the affective presence of matter and the agency of objects, thus forcing us to think anew the way we conceive of agency and historicity. We believe that cultural studies should engage with these de-linking, disruptive and de-totalising challenges in a manner that is at once open and welcoming, as well as critical. Sustained and self-reflexive critique constitutes, after all, one of the principal strengths of cultural studies practice.

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