What is cultural studies?
What and where is cultural studies today? What is it becoming? What should or could it become? What is its meaning? What is at stake as we assess the ongoing development and maturation of cultural studies as field? The International Journal of Cultural Studies is soliciting provocative answers to these and related questions, from a range of scholars internationally. We will publish their responses as an ongoing series, across multiple issues (to date, see also responses in 23.3, 23.4, 23.6, and 25.5).

Culture is transnational

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Abstract
In this article, I ask that culture be properly recognized as transnational, with all the implications of transnationalism, including cultural mobility as well as cultural imperialism and colonial legacies. I first establish that we all have culture and that the culture we all have is always already transnational. In particular, I call for the contextual specificity of the dominant culture to be acknowledged and scrutinized, as well as for all cultures to be thought of as provisional assemblages of multiple and entangled scales that co-create each other. I then offer some methodological, ethical, and political propositions to advance a truly transnational cultural studies, including radically contextualizing culture, employing comparative research, and de-westernizing academia. In conclusion, I ask for a radical mainstreaming of transnationalism in cultural studies; a universal recognition of culture as transnational and a universal engagement with a transnational sense of place in the studies of culture.

Keywords
comparative research, cultural imperialism, cultural studies, decolonization, de-westernization, globalization, queer culture, radical contextualism, transnational cultural studies, transnationalism

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Since quite early in my doctoral programme, I have become comfortable describing my professional self as a digital media scholar specializing in critical and cultural studies at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and transnationalism. While critical studies and cultural studies are not exactly the same, for me – and for many other scholars too (Fornäs, 2020) – they have been inseparably linked. Doing cultural studies translates into certain commitments that encapsulate a particular approach and sensibility with regard to scholarship. For me, it means focusing on ordinary people and everyday life with questions of identity, meaning production, and power structures in mind. It also means taking a critical attitude by asking questions about what is being taken for granted and what is missing, who is being included and excluded, where, when, and under what conditions. Finally, doing cultural studies means employing qualitative methods that enable thick description, adopting an activist orientation focused on social change, and practising self-reflectivity to scrutinize one’s own positionality.

While it has been relatively easy for me to identify what it means to do cultural studies, it has proved more challenging to define the object of my study. Culture is such an alluring, and such a confusing concept. What do we mean by ‘culture’ in cultural studies? Do we talk about the same thing when we talk about popular culture and American culture, the latter most often crudely reduced to the US? Or when we talk about digital culture, queer culture, cancel culture, culture wars, and cultural appropriation? Probably not. But to some extent, also yes. Raymond Williams proposed one of the most popular definitions of culture, suggesting that it ‘indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general’ (1976: 52). In that sense, we can think about cultures in the plural as different ways of life of particular groups who share some beliefs, values, or practices. This definition makes sense for most of the uses of culture in the examples just provided, with digital culture probably being the most controversial case because such phrasing suggests that online and offline lives are largely disjointed.

There is another way of defining culture. By googling it. Following scholars who query Google to shed light on the connotations of particular words and phrases – from ‘rights’ (Rogers, 2013) to ‘black girls’ (Noble, 2018) – I googled the word ‘culture’ on 11 August 2022, consulting its visual representations. The results are often colourful images, many displaying a diversity of people (e.g. a group holding hands while standing around the globe), languages, and flags as well as people wearing traditional costumes (some captions read: ‘Culture Day dancers in Nagoya in Japan’, ‘Joshi Festival in the Kalash tribe in Pakistan’, ‘Oma women in headdresses’). The idea of ‘culture’ grants us explanatory power, but it also activates stereotypes and simplifications. The results of my brief search exercise suggest that there is something transnational about culture, that it involves people from around the world, and it is colourful and diverse. At the same time, the results reflect power structures, particularly the exoticization of non-Western cultures and exnomination of white people, who usually do not appear alone in the images but only with people of other races and ethnicities, as if – on their own – they have no culture. The casual equation of culture with minority national,
ethnic, or racial groups reveals the prevailing Western- and white-centric conceptions of culture.

In this contribution, I ask that culture be properly recognized as transnational, with all the implications of transnationalism, including cultural mobility as well as cultural imperialism and colonial legacies. The idea that culture is transnational is not new. It can be traced back to some works considered as classic in cultural studies, at least from the Western-centric perspective (Willems, 2014; Wright, 1998). One example is the editorial in the first issue of this journal, where John Hartley explains that ‘culture and media have been organized as international industries for decades’, emphasizing that the journal ‘is interested in the study of international aspects of culture’ (1998: 6). Another example is the Doing Cultural Studies book (du Gay et al., 1997) – for many, a blueprint for conducting cultural studies – which offers an analysis of the Sony Walkman as a transnational phenomenon. And yet, the national scale remains the most popular frame in media and cultural studies (Hepp and Couldry, 2009) – as well as in many other disciplines in humanities and social sciences – while place-bound cultures still go unnoticed in many media studies, especially those anchored in Anglo-American contexts (Szulc, 2014) and employing big data analytics and digital methods (boyd and Crawford, 2012). In what follows, I assert that culture is transnational by accentuating that we all have culture and that no culture is pure, before offering some propositions for a truly transnational cultural studies.

**We all have culture**

If we accept Williams’ (1976) definition of culture as a way of life, a suggestion that we all have culture should not cause controversy. In fact, it may sound trivial, as if we state the obvious. However, in *Culture is Ordinary*, Williams (1958) felt necessary to defend it. He was arguing against equating culture with high culture, explaining that ‘Every human society has its own shape, its own purpose, its own meanings’ and culture should not be designated exclusively to ‘a special kind of people, cultivated people’ (Williams, 1958: 93). Interestingly, while Williams (1958) was protesting against equating culture with the privileged, today many popular uses of the word tend to associate culture with the marginalized, minoritized, or othered. Terms such as ‘black culture’, ‘queer culture’, ‘youth culture’, or even ‘digital culture’, do not raise eyebrows as much as their opposites do, that is, ‘white culture’, ‘straight culture’, ‘adult culture’, and ‘offline culture’. We tend to consider the latter in terms of hegemonies, normative regimes, or power structures, but we can also think about them as cultures, dominant yet particular ways of life. My aim here, therefore, is somewhat opposite to what Williams (1958) argued: by insisting that we all have culture, I ask for the recognition of the particularity of the dominant culture.

The concept of national cultures works in a similar but not exactly the same way. The idea of American culture – the dominant one – does not raise eyebrows. On the surface, it does not differ much from, say, Japanese culture or Turkish culture in that they all function as national frames (while they obviously differ in terms of cultural specificity they indicate). And yet, it is usually non-American cultures – especially the most exoticized
ones – that are invoked to embody the idea of culture as such, or ‘global culture’. They are being considered as ‘particular’, compared to allegedly universal American culture, and relegated to area specificity; for example, during conferences, ‘where there is a “queer” panel and then a “global queer” panel’ (Mowlabocus, 2017: 283). As in my image search results, it is subordinated cultures that come to stand for the colourful diversity of culture. At the same time, they are required to be explicitly named. American culture, in turn, needs to be explicitly named only in the studies of American culture per se, when the focus is specifically on an American way of life. If a study is not about that but, say, about digital context collapse, the specification seems unnecessary, even if the study is based in the American context. I illustrate this in my review of several edited collections in queer digital studies, where I show that the contributions based on American cases rarely discuss the specificity of the cultural context (Szulc, 2014).

In the curious universe of national cultures, American culture seems to exist everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It is everywhere because of its dominant position in the hierarchy of national cultures, penetrating world cultures to an extent that no other culture does. It is nowhere because it passes as a universal norm; a culture outside of naming, the location of which does not need to be specified. This could be demonstrated by the American hegemony in the Top-Level Domains system on the web (Mueller, 1998; Szulc, 2017). For example, only US educational and academic institutions have the privilege of using the generic .edu domain for their websites, while their counterparts located anywhere else in the world need to specify their location (as in edu.pl for Polish institutions and ac.uk for British institutions). Besides, American cases and samples are treated as valuable on their own. The value of insights anchored in other cultural contexts, in turn, can be challenged. When in 2020 I submitted a conference abstract about Polish migrants in the UK navigating their digital gender disidentifications (Szulc, 2020), one reviewer replied: ‘It is recommended to expand the nationalities of the study to make the results more relevant.’ The Polish, it seems, are not enough on their own.

It is important, however, to challenge the primacy of the national scale as a dominant frame of thinking about place-bound cultures. The hegemonic centre can be located at different scales: it can be occupied not only by American culture but also by Anglo-American or Western cultures as well as by particular urban cultures. If we think about global queer culture as an allegedly universal queer way of life, we can discuss how this construct is dominated by imaginations and sensibilities originating in American and Western cultures (Oswin, 2006), urban cultures (Gray, 2009), or white cultures (Alexander, 2017). The transnational approach to culture dismisses methodological nationalism (Beck, 2007), not to deny the continuing importance of the national scale but rather to decentre the national as a default frame to think of culture (Hepp and Couldry, 2009). It is an invitation, as H.J. Kim-Puri propose, to choose an adequate scale purposively and reflectively:

Depending on whether we locate the research and analysis in a particular city, town, or village, whether across national borders, whether in a specific intranational or international region, or whether across two noncontiguous cultural settings, the unit of analysis will be contingent and provisional. (Kim-Puri, 2005: 148)
By inspiring thinking of culture at multiple scales, the transnational approach automatically emphasizes the significance of place-bound cultures. This is an important reminder in times of the growing popularity of big data analytics and digital methods (Ruppert et al., 2013). While big data open up new research opportunities, we should remain critical of their limitations, including issues related to representativeness and ethics as well as decontextualization (boyd and Crawford, 2012; Brock, 2015; Venturini et al., 2018). In a recent article on digital gender diversity, I criticize the tendency to decontextualize social media data, for example when analysing (largely anonymous) posts on Tumblr with gender-diverse hashtags (Szulc, 2020). I explain that ‘[s]uch data undoubtedly have their advantages, while they also make it difficult to specify what in fact we are learning about whom’ (Szulc, 2020: 5452). While some hashtags are culturally specific – for example, #JestemLGBT, meaning ‘I am LGBT’, in a recent Twitter campaign by the Polish queer community (Szulc, 2019) – the more generic hashtags, particularly in English – such as #genderqueer or #nonbinary – may appear as originating in no place. We all have culture, no matter the hashtags and languages we use, which afford us a view that is neither from everywhere nor from nowhere (Haraway, 1988).

**No culture is pure**

After establishing that we all have culture, I would like to move on to affirm that the culture we all have is always already transnational. This too is not a new idea. Reflecting on his own cultural background, Stuart Hall explained that ‘Jamaican culture is a translation of European and African and Indian cultures. And Jamaican culture in England is a translation of that translation, composed out of African, European, and Indian cultures in the Caribbean, now further translated in relation to twenty-first-century Britain and Europe’ (Hall in Paul, 2005: np). He concluded that ‘culture is always a translation – there’s no pure culture’ – and proposed thinking of culture in terms of routes instead of roots: ‘the various routes by which people travel, culture travels, culture moves, culture develops, culture changes, cultures migrate’ (Hall in Paul, 2005: np). In a similar vein, Vijay Prashad (2003) challenges the pure Asianness of martial arts such as kung fu, proposing a polycultural rather than multicultural view of the world. He opposes the assumption of pre-existing bounded cultures that interact with each other, which is a multicultural view, and emphasizes that ‘our cultures are linked in more ways than we could catalogue’ (Prashad, 2003: 81; see also Ang, 1996; Brunton, 2022).

Advocating that no culture is pure does not mean asserting that we all live in one big cultural cauldron, where all ways of life are so mixed up that they become unrecognizable. The transnational approach to culture is focused on tracing the linkages between cultures, acknowledging that the linkages exist at different scales. In my book *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland: Cross-border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines* (Szulc, 2018), I show how the magazines became assemblages of multiple scales. One of them, *Filo*, was published in a city at the Baltic Sea, which meant that its producers regularly met gay sailors who gave them Western gay magazines, partially reprinted in *Filo*. The national context also mattered because of Poland’s unique laws on censorship and homosexuality, different from other countries of the Eastern Bloc. The bloc mattered
too, as it was easier to travel to other countries within the bloc than outside the bloc, for example to the beaches of Bulgaria, as reported in *Filo*. Additionally, the magazine’s content reflected the hegemony of Anglo-American gay liberation culture, with articles discussing such concepts as ‘gay’, ‘darkroom’, and ‘coming out’. It is therefore crucial not only to think of culture at different scales but also to think of it as ‘a unique combination and imbrication of multiple geographical scales’ (Szulc, 2018: 222).

The direction of travel of people, objects, and ideas is another key focus of the transnational approach to culture. Posed differently, it is a question about how much of which culture is in other cultures. Acknowledging geopolitical and postcolonial structures, scholars point to the disproportional exchanges from the West to the Rest. Similarly, some early works on the diffusion of queer culture point to the processes of Westernization, if not simply Americanization, in how non-normative genders and sexualities have come to be thought of in non-Western contexts (e.g. Altman, 1996; Massad, 2002). Other scholars challenge the binary dichotomies of the West and the Rest, global and local, or modern and traditional (Chiang and Heinrich, 2014; Oswin, 2006), and point to the processes of complicated adaptation rather than a simple adoption of Western models of queerness, referring to those processes as cultural hybridization (Martin, 2009), creolization (Enteen, 2010), or dubbing (Boellstorff, 2003). As works on gay imperialism demonstrate (Ahmed, 2011; Haritaworn et al., 2008), it remains critical to recognize both American or Western cultural imperialism and creative local agencies.

Two points of clarification are in order. First, while recognizing uneven geopolitical and postcolonial power structures, we should avoid the temptation of essentializing American or Western cultures. Remember, no culture is pure (Hall in Paul, 2005) and culture is always intersectional, as two other contributions to this series make clear (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020; Johnson and Joseph, 2020). The Rest is already within the West for many reasons, including colonial legacies, cultural appropriations, and migrant cultures. For example, regarding queer culture, scholars point out that what is often considered an American model of gay identity and politics – widely travelling to be adopted, adapted, or rejected by different cultures around the world – has in fact been co-constituted by migrants and their descendants, including those with roots in Cuba (Peña, 2004), the Philippines (Manalansan, 2003), Puerto Rico (Negrón-Muntaner, 1999), and Europe (Povinelli and Chauncey, 1999). And the West is already within the Rest, as demonstrated in the study of the Sony Walkman, a Japanese cultural artifact that was a result of ‘a hybrid way of organizing work which drew from the conventions of business practice developed in both Japan and the United States’ (du Gay et al., 1997: 45). While it is useful to track linkages and exchanges between them, cultures are best thought of as provisional assemblages that co-create each other.

Second, the travel of people, objects, and ideas is not unidirectional. They travel not only from the West to the Rest but also from the Rest to the West as well as in many other directions within the West and within the Rest. In my analysis of gay and lesbian magazines in communist Poland, I propose a framework of networked sexual globalization to make sense of those multiple flows in different directions and at different scales (Szulc, 2018: 220–4). Each network consists of nodes and connections between them. Some
nodes may be more central, and some connections may be stronger than others, which enables recognizing power structures within the continuous travels. The metaphor of travels as flows within the network is useful as it invokes the idea of a place of departure: it affords the scrutiny of prevalent movements from particular nodes and in particular directions, while it eschews essentializing claims about ‘true’ cultural origins. Unlike the ‘origin’, the place of departure is only the previous stop. Networks are also dynamic, which means that the centrality of nodes and the strength of connections can change in time, accounting for cultural and historical particularities. While cultures can be distinguished by their provisionally particular ways of life, there is no pure culture that would be immune to transnational influences.

Transnational cultural studies

Recognizing that we all have culture which is always already transnational has implications for how we do cultural studies. In this part, I offer some methodological, ethical, and political propositions that can help us advance a truly transnational cultural studies. I focus on radically contextualizing culture, employing comparative research, and de-westernizing academia. Of course, this list is not intended to be exhaustive and it reflects my personal and academic interests. As shown by other contributors to this series, the list could be extended by calls for more activist and less white cultural studies (Johnson and Joseph, 2020) that is anchored in empirical research of actually existing cultures and lived experience (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020; Woo, 2020) and has a futurist outlook (Powers, 2020) on such pressing – and, indeed, transnational – contemporary challenges as climate change (Ang, 2020), democracy deficit, culture wars, and the datafication of the social fabric (Couldry, 2020). Without the pressures to speak absolute truths (Ang, 1996), cultural studies occupies a privileged position to answer all the multiple calls so to arrive at a better understanding of cultural complexity.

Radical contextualism

John Pickles states, somewhat controversially, that: ‘Despite its name, cultural studies is never about culture but about socio-geo-historical context’ (2012: 545). Of course, cultural studies is always about culture, but Pickles (2012) makes a valid point about the impossibility of studying culture out of context. Ien Ang (1996) goes even further by proposing radical contextualism. She justifies the necessity for this by pointing to the growing complexity of culture, where meaning emerges within a ‘multicontextually determined situation’ (1996: 70). In truth, radical contextualism is not a proposition but an observation about the condition of culture, especially in postmodernity; a condition characterized by ‘eternally expanding contextuality’ (Ang, 1996: 3). Ang lists some of the contexts to be considered in an analysis of culture, including nation and gender as well as ‘race, class, ethnicity, regional location, generation, religion, economic conjuncture, political climate, family history, the weather, and so on and so on’ (1996: 73). Meanings of culture cannot be assigned a priori but can only be determined post facto, through a
slow analysis (Levine, 2022) focused on the specificity of cultures in a plethora of interrelated and interdependent contexts.

This is easier said than done. How slow should our analysis of culture be and how many contexts should we include to arrive at a radically contextualized interpretation? Ang is aware that it is impossible to consider ‘the whole contextual horizon’ of culture (1996: 73) and proposes translating this limitation into an opportunity and a responsibility. This means, first, acknowledging the radical contextualism of culture and, second, making a conscious and explicit choice of particular contextual frameworks. The choice can be driven by the data (What contexts matter most for my object of study?), concepts (What contexts matter the most from my theoretical perspective?), or politics (What contexts matter the most for my political commitments?). By foregrounding the latter, as Ang suggests, we can turn ‘partial truths’ into ‘positioned truths’ of cultural studies (1996: 78). While radical contextualism addresses many points raised by the transnational approach to culture, transnationalism further sensitizes us to consider contexts at multiple and entangled scales, and to scrutinize the context of the dominant culture. Particularizing the universal by making the familiar strange is radical because the context of the dominant culture can easily feel so obvious that it does not need to be named, let alone examined.

**Comparative research**

One way that Ang (1996) proposes to embrace radical contextualism in empirical research is by doing ethnography. Here, following the transnational approach to culture, I would like to highlight the potential of comparative research for reaching radically contextualized insights. Sonia Livingstone reminds us that all analysis is comparative: ‘Implicitly or explicitly, research uses conceptual categories that assert distinctions (whether in terms of nation or social group or institution or medium or time)’ (2003: 483). She explains that the essence of comparative research is to simultaneously identify similarities and differences (Livingstone, 2003), while Kim-Puri go further than that by highlighting the importance of linkages between cultures:

> The idea of linkages is not merely to identify similarities or differences across related phenomena. […] On the contrary, the purpose of establishing linkages is to call attention to the complex, sometimes contradictory, and often unequal interconnections that exist across cultural settings, howsoever defined. (2005: 148–9)

The benefits of good comparative research are, among other things, that it leaves the dominant culture no place to hide its context and enables the recognition of shared macro-level – indeed, transnational – processes influencing diverse cultures, such as industrialization, urbanization, or secularization, as well as colonial legacies (Sender, 2013).

The question remains, as Hepp and Couldry (2009) put it: what should comparative research be comparing? The authors challenge the casual equation of nations with societies in comparative research, clarifying that the national scale may indeed make sense in some research (e.g. of some media systems), but not in others (e.g. of some media
cultures) (Hepp and Couldry, 2009). Even if the choice of the national scale for comparison is well justified, it still becomes crucial to explain the choice of particular countries and their number, keeping in mind geopolitical and postcolonial power structures (e.g. the question of what the implications are of comparing central countries to peripheral countries, or some peripheral countries to other peripheral countries). Nevertheless, the transnational approach to culture requires considering other scales for comparison, including neighbourhoods, cities, and regions as well as borderlands and languages. When conceptualizing culture as a way of life, it is also important to follow a media-decentred approach (Gray et al., 2019), since it is unlikely that anyone could live their life engaging only with a single media technology (Madianou and Miller, 2012). As with the choice of contexts for radical contextualism, the choice of scales and units for comparative research must be explained and reflected upon.

**De-westernized academia**

Much has been written about the parochialism of media and cultural studies (e.g. Abbas and Erni, 2004; Curran and Park, 2000; Goggin and McCelland, 2009; Mohan et al., 2022; Shome, 2009; Thussu, 2009), and yet not much has changed. In his inaugural editorial for this journal, Hartley admitted that the ‘institutional base of cultural studies is strong along a ‘triple-A’ (Anglo-American-Australian) axis’ (1998: 6), a statement running the risk of masking alternative genealogies of cultural studies (Chen and Chua, 2015; Willems, 2014). More than two decades have passed and our reflections on *What Is Cultural Studies?* in this series are offered mainly by those based in the West, despite the editors’ effort to solicit contributions from scholars based in other places in the world (personal communication). Out of 15 contributors to date (up to mid-2022), including myself, eight authors have had institutional affiliations in the US and two in the UK, with the remaining five authors each affiliated with an institution in either Australia, Canada, Sweden, Brazil, or Trinidad and Tobago. In a recent similarly reflective forum on ‘The Future of Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies’ (Ono, 2020), all eight contributors have had institutional affiliations in the US. The authors in both series bring with them diverse intersectional experiences related to their gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, mother tongue, and country of origin, among other aspects. But we cannot ignore the fact that most of us are based in the West, usually in the US, and speak fluent English. This puts us in the privileged position as those – allegedly and problematically – ‘ideally suited’ for reflecting on the state of the art of cultural studies.

Among the many more or less obvious solutions already discussed by others (including those quoted in the previous paragraph), I would like to highlight three propositions. First, it remains crucial that not only the Rest reads the West but also the other way round. Some, admittedly imperfect, ways to achieve this is by intensifying our efforts to translate works from different languages to English – while recognizing translation as a valuable academic practice – and strengthening foreign language training in Anglophone institutions. A good example is the recent AoIR Translations Project, piloted by the Association of Internet Researchers and led by Crystal Abidin (Telli Aydemir, 2020). Second, we need to learn to write
differently and value those different kinds of writing. Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera* is an excellent example of writing that is multilingual and combines academic essays with personal reflections and poems. Finally, we need to persistently demand of the dominant culture that it examines the specificity of its context, questions the centrality of its theories, and values alternative conceptualizations and methodologies. As one step in that direction, when Eve Ng and I served as co-chairs of the International Communication Association’s LGBTQ Studies interest group, we introduced a new evaluation criterion for conference submissions that requires authors to describe the cultural context in all submitted works, including those discussing US cases, which may be thought to need no explanation. We cannot practise a truly transnational cultural studies without truly transnational structures of knowledge production.

**Conclusion**

Culture is transnational. It is now more transnational than ever, in times of rapid digital developments, intensified cultural exchanges, and large migration flows. Cultural studies cannot afford to ignore this fact and now, more than ever, needs to embrace transnationalism at its very core and at all levels: theoretically, methodologically, ethically, institutionally, and politically. What I propose in this contribution is not entirely new. I showed how the transnational approach to culture, the recognition that we all have culture that is always already transnational, originates in some early cultural studies works considered as classic. What I ask for is a radical mainstreaming of transnationalism in cultural studies; a universal recognition of culture as transnational and a universal engagement with a transnational sense of place in the studies of culture. Given the ‘inter- or even post-disciplinary’ character of cultural studies (Hartley, 1998: 5), this could be a move permeating adjacent areas of humanities and social sciences, including media studies, which may already be in desperate need of both culture and transnationalism in the face of the datafication of everything and the deceptive charm of big data analytics.

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