A Companion to Cultural Geography

Edited by
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and

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A Companion to Cultural Geography
Blackwell Companions to Geography

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# Contents

Notes on Contributors viii  
List of Figures and Tables xiii  

1 Introduction 1  
   James S. Duncan, Nuala C. Johnson, and Richard H. Schein  

Part I Introducing Cultural Geographies 9  
2 Cultural Traditions 11  
   Richard H. Schein  
3 Cultural Turns 24  
   Heidi Scott  
4 A Critique of the Cultural Turn 38  
   Clive Barnett  

Part II Theoretical Intersections 49  
5 Historical Materialism and Marxism 51  
   Don Mitchell  
6 Feminisms 66  
   Joanne Sharp  
7 Poststructuralism 79  
   Deborah P. Dixon and John Paul Jones III  
8 Psychoanalytic Approaches 108  
   Paul Kingsbury  
9 Performance and Performativity: A Geography of Unknown Lands 121  
   Nigel Thrift
Part III  Nature/Culture  137
10 Cultures of Science  139
David N. Livingstone

11 Nature and Culture: On the Career of a False Problem  151
Bruce Braun

12 Cultural Ecology  180
Paul Robbins

13 Environmental History  194
Gerry Kearns

14 Ethics and the Human Environment  209
Jonathan M. Smith

Part IV  Culture And Identity  221
15 Nationalism  223
John Agnew

16 Critical ‘Race’ Approaches to Cultural Geography  238
Audrey Kobayashi

17 Social Class  250
Nancy Duncan and Stephen Legg

18 Sexuality  265
Richard Phillips

19 The Body  279
Michael Landzelius

20 Consumption  298
James Kneale and Claire Dwyer

21 Public Memory  316
Nuala C. Johnson

Part V  Landscapes  329
22 Economic Landscapes  331
Susan Roberts

23 Political Landscapes  347
Karen E. Till

24 Religious Landscapes  365
Lily Kong

25 Landscapes of Home  382
James S. Duncan and David Lambert

26 Landscapes of Childhood and Youth  404
Elizabeth A. Gagen
CONTENTS

27  Landscape in Film
    Robert Shannon Peckham 420

28  Landscape and Art
    Stephen Daniels 430

Part VI  Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies 447

29  Imperial Geographies
    Daniel Clayton 449

30  Postcolonial Geographies
    James R. Ryan 469

31  Diaspora
    Carl Dahlman 485

32  Transnationalism
    Cheryl McEwan 499

Index 513
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Nuala C. Johnson is a cultural-historical geographer at the School of Geography, Queen’s University, Belfast. She has published a range of journal articles and book chapters on national identity, the heritage industry, monuments and memorials, and social memory. She is author of *Ireland, the Great War and the Geography of Remembrance* (2003).

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Lily Kong is Professor of Geography at the National University of Singapore where she is also Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She is a social-cultural geographer with broad interests, including geographies of religion, geographies of music, constructions of nation and identity, and constructions of nature and environment. Among her recent publications are Constructions of ‘Nation’: The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore (2003) and Landscapes: Ways of Imagining the World (2003).

David Lambert teaches cultural geography at the University of Cambridge and is a Fellow of Emmanuel College. He is author of several articles on White Caribbean culture and the cultural politics of anti-abolitionism.

Michael Landzelius is a Researcher in the Department of Geography at Lund University, Sweden. His international experience includes two years in the department of Geography at Cambridge University, UK, and one year in the Geography departments of Syracuse University and the University of California at Berkeley. He has published in journals such as Environment and Planning D: Society and Space and The American Journal of Semiotics, as well as in edited volumes. He presently researches the politics of space in case studies focusing on Swedish political hygienism in the 1930s and 1940s, and on scapes and flows of migratory paths in relation to cosmopolitanism and globalization.

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Richard Phillips teaches cultural geography at the European Studies Research Institute at the University of Salford. His publications include *Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure* (1997) and *De-centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis* (2000).

Paul Robbins is Associate Professor of Geography at Ohio State University. His research on forests in Rajasthan, lawns in Ohio, and Elk in Montana, centers on the politics of landscape change and the cultural struggles inherent in the classification and measurement of the environment.

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Jonathan M. Smith is a cultural-historical geographer primarily interested in the history of geographical ideas and geographical thought. He has published articles on various subjects, co-edited six books, and is co-editor of the journal Philosophy and Geography.

Nigel Thrift is a Professor in the School of Geography at the University of Oxford. His main interests are currently centered on nonrepresentational theory, the history of time, management knowledges, and the intersection between biology and information and communication technologies. Recent publications include Cities (with Ash Amin, Polity, 2002), The Cultural Geography Handbook (co-edited with Kay Anderson, Mona Domosh, and Steve Pile, 2003), and Patterned Ground (co-edited with Stephan Harrison and Steve Pile, 2003).

Karen E. Till is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Minnesota and co-director of the Humanities Institute Space and Place Research Group. Karen is co-editor of the volume Textures of Place: Geographies of Imagination, Experience, and Paradox (2001) and has published numerous book chapters and articles about her research on social memory, identity politics, and urban landscapes in the US and Germany. She is currently completing a book based upon 10 years of research in postunification Berlin, tentatively entitled The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place.
Figures

18.1 Gayfest, Manchester, UK, 2001 (courtesy of Alexandra Hopps) 266
18.2 Map from King Solomon’s Mines, by H. Rider Haggard (1885, frontispiece) 267
18.3 The US suburb of Levittown (Gans 1967, frontispiece) 267
22.1 Port of Los Angeles website welcome, 2003 335
22.2 Example of a container tracking record (excerpts) 342
23.1 A political landscape: the USA/Mexico Border/La Frontera (courtesy of Suzanne Michel) 348
23.2 Border Dynamics (courtesy of Beyond Borders and Taller Yonke Workshop) 359
26.1 Experience by Martin Amis (reproduced by permission of The Random House Group Ltd and The Guardian) 405
28.1 Geoffrey Hutchings, Panoramic Sketch Recording the Combined Study of Map and Landscape (from Landscape Drawing, 1960) 433
28.2 P. J. Loutherbourgh, Coalbrookdale by Night (1801). Oil on canvas (the Science Museum, London). 437
28.3 Calendar print with the actress Huma Malin (ca. 1985). Publisher unknown. (Photograph Chris Pinney.) 438
28.4 Elizabeth Pett and Firescreen, from Colin Painter, At Home with Constable’s Cornfield (1996). (Copyright © Anne Painter.) 439
28.5 Andy Goldsworthy and David Matless at circular drystone wall. Barfil Farm, Dumfriesshire, 1993. (Photograph George Revill.) 441
28.6 Derek Hampson, The Death of O (oil on canvas); Gary Priestnall, Brightness, Texture and Elevation (digital print), from Hawley Square 2001 443

Table

22.1 US port rankings, 2000 335
Chapter 1

Introduction

James S. Duncan, Nuala C. Johnson, and Richard H. Schein

In the past two decades cultural geography has undergone significant theoretical, substantive, and methodological shifts. While cultural geography has a long and important place in the intellectual and institutional history of the discipline, the recent “spatial and cultural turns” in the humanities and social sciences have repositioned the field as one of considerable import to contemporary debates in Anglo-American human geography. During the first half of the twentieth century the concern of Carl Sauer and his students in the “Berkeley School” with human/environment relationships, material culture, and landscape interpretation marked out some of the terrain to which cultural geographers would continue to devote attention (Leighly 1963; Wagner & Mikesell 1962). The deployment of theoretical insights from cultural anthropology and landscape history during this period emphasized the interdisciplinary nature of cultural geography, a trend that continues today.

The importation into geography of positivist theory, behavioral psychology and highly abstract quantitative methods in the 1960s provoked cultural geographers to challenge the prevailing emphasis on spatial model building. Cultural geographers’ emphasis on the symbolic dimension of human activities, the relevance of historical understanding of societal processes, and a commitment to an interpretative epistemology all challenged the scientific reductionism and economism of a positivist human geography. It was through cultural and historical geography that many of these issues were addressed and presented to a wider audience (Tuan 1974; Lowenthal 1961; Meinig 1979; Zelinsky 1973). During the 1980s there arose what some have termed a “new cultural geography” which questioned the predominant Berkeley School’s use of the term culture as a reified “superorganic” explanatory variable (Duncan 1980) and offered in its place a more sociological and political approach which attempted to understand the “inner workings of culture” which had been consigned to a “black box” by earlier generations. British social geographers (Jackson 1980) who had previously dismissed cultural geography as irrelevant to contemporary urban social and political issues, began to turn to cultural history (Williams 1973) and the then rising field of cultural studies (Hall 1980) for
inspiration in the development of this “new cultural geography.” The study of “race” and ethnicity in historic and contemporary contexts for instance shifted from an emphasis on spatial mapping to an exploration of cultural representations of “race,” which merged conventional concerns in social geography with more explicitly cultural interpretations (Anderson 1988; Jackson 1987; Ley 1974).

Similarly the emergence in the 1970s and 1980s of a radical human geography both invigorated cultural geographers’ concern with a materialist basis for landscape interpretation (Cosgrove 1983; Daniels 1989) while simultaneously providing a focus for a broader critique of the limitations of economistic Marxist interpretations of human societies (Duncan & Ley 1982). Within cultural geography there also emerged a reassertion of the centrality of place to human geographical concerns (Agnew 1987; Entrikin 1991; Relph 1976). Feminist geographers too have had a marked impact on contemporary cultural geography by highlighting the prevalence of the detached male gaze in the study of landscape and other cultural phenomena (Rose 1993; Nash 1996). The promotion of a geography which would value the subjective, subaltern voices and cultural specificity, and which would employ a range of source material not normally used by geographers, would open up the discipline to methods and debates prevalent in philosophy, literary theory, cultural studies, and anthropology (Ley & Samuels 1978; Duncan & Duncan 1988; Gregory 1994; Doel 1995).

While cultural geography has always been an open, dynamic field, over the past decade there have been particularly rapid changes in what is now commonly referred to as the “cultural turn.” These changes have regularly been animated by cultural geographers and have had wide-ranging effects in political, economic, and social geography. Issues of discourse, power, justice, the body, difference, hybridity, transnationalism, actor networks, resistance, transgression, performance, and representation have been particularly important in contemporary approaches within cultural geography and beyond. Feminist, Marxist, critical, psychoanalytical, post-colonial, and postmodern theorists have led the subfield in radically interrogating and transforming geographical conceptions of space, place, and landscape (Rose 1993; McDowell 1999; Mitchell 2000; Nast & Pile 1998; Jacobs 1996; Ryan 1997; Driver 2001; Thrift 1996; Gregory 2002). Since the 1970s, interdisciplinary inspiration has come from a wide range of thinkers such as Foucault, Barthes, Giddens, de Certeau, Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari, Lefebvre, Bakhtin, Said, Butler, Harraway, Bourdieu, Habermas, Latour, and Lacan. Programmatic statements of the new directions that cultural geography has moved in are increasingly being matched by detailed empirical investigations.

Cultural geographers’ traditional concern with human/environment relationships has continued, and over the past decade renewed debates about how nature is constituted and understood across different human societies have been particularly vigorous. Ranging from considerations of situated knowledges, environmental ethics, popular understandings of environmental issues to the unsettling of the nature/culture divide, cultural geography has been central in efforts to reconceptualize nature and critically examine environmental policy (Whatmore 2002; Fitzsimmons 1989; Castree & Braun 2001; Wolch & Emel 1998). In particular this is contributing to reestablishing stronger theoretical links between human and physical geography and has prompted a critical analysis of the basis of science. Cultural
geographers’ examination of the ways in which “scientific knowledge” has been deployed to support a range of colonial, imperial, and other economic and political projects has served to advance the notion that sociologies and histories of science may be inadequate without a cultural geography of scientific investigation.

Cultural geography therefore has been an important area of the discipline because of the centrality of its debates to the broader directions that geography is taking. Outside of disciplinary boundaries cultural geography has become increasingly visible to anthropologists, historians of science, cultural historians, archaeologists, and sociologists. Cross-disciplinary research and collaborative publication is a testament to this trend (e.g. Jackson et al. 2000). Cultural geography, however, is not only important in the arena of intellectual debate, but cultural geographers have also been having a small but increasing impact on policy-making communities (e.g. environmental planners, heritage managers, museum curators). The “field” is not simply a setting for research, but a network of political, management, and research worlds mutually incorporating diverse types of knowledge.

Structure

This volume begins with an introduction of key shifts in direction of cultural geography in the twentieth century. Secondly, the principal approaches that currently animate work in cultural geography are analyzed. Thirdly, the theoretical perspectives of the previous section are elaborated in a series of essays that focus on some of the major thematic areas to which cultural geographers have contributed. Collectively these chapters illuminate how the critical interventions of cultural geography have informed these specific realms of inquiry. Although the editors cannot (and would not want to) offer a single definition of cultural geography, they attempt to highlight the central ways in which ideas of culture have been debated, deployed, materialized, and contested across a range of spatial and historical contexts. In so doing the guiding principle of this book is the contingent, diverse, and contradictory manner in which human societies approach the hermeneutic project of making sense of their existential and material spaces for living. The editors recognize that cultural geography cannot be divorced from other branches of geography, and the dialogue that cultural geographers have engaged in with political, economic, historical, and social geographers will be woven throughout the volume.

The collection begins with an exploration of tradition in cultural geography (chapter 2). Richard Schein approaches the question of “tradition” itself, and explores a tentative genealogy of cultural geography that focuses upon the tensions inherent in positing a “traditional” versus a “new” cultural geography, especially as the latter engages with human geography’s cultural turn. Given the strong feelings, both pro and con, which have been generated by the cultural turn within geography and more broadly within the social sciences, we thought that it might be productive to offer two views of its impact in geography, one by a cultural geographer sympathetic to the turn and the second by a non-cultural geographer who is considerably more skeptical. Heidi Scott (chapter 3) offers an overview of the impact of the cultural turn within contemporary geography over the past decade, while highlighting points of convergence with other fields. She offers an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the multiple practices of cultural geography while
providing a sense of the power struggles both within the subfield over the nature of cultural explanation and between subfields over whether cultural explanation has tended to overshadow and detract from other areas of geography. Clive Barnett’s essay (chapter 4) reflects a continuing uneasiness with the turn toward cultural explanation on the part of geographers in the various subfields that have only recently begun to take culture seriously. He expresses a more general concern that the consideration of culture could too easily become a central focus of geography as a whole.

Don Mitchell (chapter 5) argues that culture needs to be reintegrated into the social totality of capitalism as a moment of power. A historical-materialist cultural geography must understand that culture is a field of accumulations, not reducible to superstructural epiphenomena, but neither should an attention upon culture constitute a retreat into the immaterial as an explanatory realm. Joanne Sharp (chapter 6) traces the convergence between certain lines of feminist inquiry and cultural geography. She singles out as particularly fruitful the themes of identity politics, embodiment, and the debate over landscape and the masculine gaze. John Paul Jones and Deborah Dixon review key features of poststructuralism (chapter 7), especially as articulated through key ideas in cultural geography, such as representation and space, and including an attention to questions of methodology. They move from a synopsis of structuralism as a starting point, through basic theoretical tenets of poststructuralism, to discuss future articulations of poststructuralism with cultural geography. Paul Kingsbury addresses a general fear or distrust of psychoanalytic theory by geographers in general (chapter 8), before explicating how different psychoanalytic approaches have been reinterpreted and used by cultural geographers. He addresses Freudian approaches, object-relations theory, and Lacanian approaches in his treatment. Nigel Thrift (chapter 9) argues that nonrepresentational theory provides the basis for a different type of cultural geography than is offered by most cultural geographers. The core of his argument is that geographers should turn increasingly to the study of such embodied practices as dance, music, and crying as ways of engaging with the world.

David Livingstone’s paper (chapter 10) highlights the significance of space in understanding the production and consumption of scientific knowledges. From the sites of production and the circulation of scientific theory and practice to the geographies of reception, Livingstone draws our attention to the new avenues of research stimulated by spatializing our understanding of the cultures of science. Bruce Braun tracks the relation between nature and culture in post-Second World War human geography (chapter 11). He specifically addresses four moments of the nature/culture problematic – cultural ecology, political ecology, cultural studies of the environment, and “beyond nature/culture” – through the work of Deleuze, Guattari, and Latour, finally calling into question the ontological distinction in the ordering categories themselves. Paul Robbins tackles practical and daily considerations of the nature/culture problematic through the lens of cultural ecology as the human production of and adaptation to the environment (chapter 12). He focuses particularly on critical contemporary problems of economic development, global poverty, and environmental change. In his review of environmental history, Gerry Kearns (chapter 13) explores the continuing importance of an ecological tradition both within geography and macrohistorical studies. He then examines the treatment
of environmental history by Marxist geographers and new cultural geographers. Jonathan Smith (chapter 14) focuses on various approaches deployed to answer the question of whether it is ethical to shape the environment. Drawing on moral philosophy and adopting an historical perspective, Smith identifies key strands of thought that have characterized our moral position in relation to the environment from premodern to postmodern concerns.

Drawing from a range of contemporary political and social theory, John Agnew (chapter 15) charts the varied approaches that have developed to both understanding and, at times, dismissing nationalism. He surveys the strengths and limitations of territorial, diasporic, ethnic, religious, gendered, and landscape-based interpretations of the idea and practices of nationalism. Audrey Kobayashi approaches the concept of “race” as both a way of life deeply embedded in the European colonial past and lived out in the present as a taken-for-granted reality and as an analytical concept (chapter 16). The chapter begins with a review of the concept of “race” as it is understood in contemporary antiracist geography, then moves to a brief analysis of how the production of antiracist geography has developed in three contemporary Western and Northern contexts. Nancy Duncan and Stephen Legg (chapter 17) review the reasons why class has remained relatively neglected by cultural geographers, in spite of the tremendous interest shown in subjectivity and identity formation. They argue that while there are some good reasons why older notions of class in geography have been seen as unhelpful in understanding questions of identity, there is also no inherent reason why this should be so. In fact, they suggest, certain reworked Marxian and other dynamic and relational notions of class could contribute greatly to cultural analysis. Richard Phillips (chapter 18) considers the relationships between sexualities and space. Focusing both on heterosexual and homosexual dimensions of identity formation and drawing from a range of contemporary and historical contexts, Phillips examines the critical role of space in the construction and reconstruction of sexualized identities. Michael Landzelius (chapter 19) undertakes a sweeping survey of the way in which geographers have understood the body, from the behaviorists and phenomenologists of the 1970s to the psychoanalytic approaches of the late 1990s, and from the body–space nexus through impairment, illness, and the body.

James Kneale and Claire Dwyer (chapter 20) consider the varied meanings attending the concept of consumption. Drawing from a range of cultural theory, they explore the possibilities for developing a more nuanced understanding of the social nature of consumption and its materiality in contemporary society. Nuala Johnson (chapter 21) focuses attention on the manner in which ideas of public memory have been integrated into a geographical literature on identity formation and representation. She highlights the significance of space in particular in the articulation and conjugation of social memory.

Susan Roberts briefly reviews the manner in which “culture” and “economy” generally have been treated as things and as separate spheres (chapter 22), and explores the relations between economic and cultural geography that are central to geography’s cultural turn. By way of example, she examines US maritime ports as places evincing a particularly interesting set of relations infused with economic, cultural, and (geo)political concerns. Karen Till (chapter 23) explores the complex ways that the interpretation of political landscapes is conceptualized through examining
symbolic approaches to landscapes of the state; the material social relations revealed and hidden in landscapes of work, and the opportunities for developing an approach to understanding political landscapes which is embedded in everyday practice. Lily Kong (chapter 24) surveys the contributions of cultural geography to the study of religion. She draws attention to the significance of place in the understanding of religious belief systems and practices and she proposes a set of research questions for developing a “new” geography of religion. In chapter 25, James Duncan and David Lambert examine the complex and ambiguous notion of home. They do so by first reviewing notions of home as dwelling and its links to identity. They then go on to survey the idea of home place, with particular reference to the experiences of home in the British Empire. Elizabeth Gagen (chapter 26) explores the cultural geography of childhood by focusing upon the changing conceptions of childhood and the spaces, both adult and child-centered, in which such definitions are negotiated. She also addresses some of the particular methodological and ethical issues attendant in researching children. In chapter 27, Shannan Peckham examines the social and geographical context of cinema. He argues that a proper analysis of film must take into consideration its multiple geographies; not only those of its production, but those of its reception as well. The interconnections between landscape art and cultural geography since the 1980s is the subject of Steven Daniels’ chapter 28. He considers both art and landscape to be “keywords” in the sense that the late Raymond Williams used the term. As such the chapter traces the interrelations between these terms as they are worked through a range of different representational practices.

Dan Clayton (chapter 29) situates the geographical study of colonialism both within the postcolonial turn and in relation to the recent historiographic interest in tracing the interlinkages between the practices of colonialism and the ideological and material support provided to it by contemporaneous geography. In chapter 30, James Ryan charts the relationship between postcolonialism and cultural geography. He investigates the dominant themes that have characterized research into geographical knowledge and colonial power, colonial and postcolonial identities, and the spaces of colonial encounter and resistance. Carl Dahlman explores the diaspora concept, including its relations to terms such as transnationalism, multiculturalism, and hybridity, before employing a critical (geo)political perspective to diaspora through the case of Kurdish emigration to Europe and North America (chapter 31). In chapter 32, Cheryl McEwan examines the major debates centered on cultural globalization and transnationalism. She interrogates the connections between cultural mobility and identities, citizenship and transnational spaces; and she highlights the possibilities for geographical scholarship harnessing the progressive and transgressive potential of transnationalism.

REFERENCES


INTRODUCTION


Part I  Introducing Cultural Geographies

2  Cultural Traditions  
   Richard H. Schein  

3  Cultural Turns  
   Heidi Scott  

4  A Critique of the Cultural Turn  
   Clive Barnett  

11  
24  
38  
Scholarly traditions often are presented in one of two ways. Either the tradition is held up as an honorable thing, and is presented as a teleological intellectual genealogy that naturally and inexorably leads to one’s own conceptual or substantive or theoretical position within the academy. Or, the tradition is presented as a sort of intellectual ‘other’ – the defining foil for a more progressive or enlightened or sophisticated or somehow better way of approaching the subject at hand. Traditions are, of course, invented, as we learned a generation ago from Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (1983). And although they were interested in cultural practices that seemed to serve a burgeoning (western) nationalism during the apogee of the modern nation-state, their observations are nonetheless instructive for this brief explication and exploration of traditions (and continuities) in cultural geography. More specifically, they taught us that traditions always serve a purpose – they serve a function, whether consciously intended or not – and often the interrogation of that function is as rewarding an enterprise as the examination of the ‘tradition’ per se. This position itself might be associated with the so-called ‘new cultural geography’ (which is really not so new anymore; the opening salvos in the once-called civil war in cultural geography having been fired some 20-plus years ago), for it presumes to take an ironic stance toward the question of ‘traditional cultural geography’ and its purpose is less to present an unquestionable, even unquestioned, historiography of an academic subdiscipline, than it is to raise certain positions, histories, genealogies, and debates that might serve to better place the pursuit of cultural geography today. Put another way, while this chapter might purport to offer a disciplinary road map of sorts, showing how we got here from then, the lessons of critical cartography tell us that all road maps are normative, and that to make claims about the past is as much about making claims on the future as it is in attempting to uncover some inalienable truth about the practice of, in this case, cultural geography.

At this point we also might take a cue from the resurgence of geographical interests in historiography, and particularly from one of the canonical works of that burgeoning literature, David Livingstone’s *The Geographical Tradition* (1992). One of Livingstone’s main points is that intellectual ideas and academic progress do not
occur on the head of a pin. To understand the development of a tradition – or perhaps more accurately traditions – is to interrogate not only the ideas at the core of an intellectual enterprise as ideas, but also to realize the institutional contexts (in our case, usually academic or university ones) which nurture (or don’t) particular kinds of scholarship, as well as the general societal contexts of those ideas and their framing institutions. Finally, one of the lessons of the past 20 years of geographical scholarship is a newfound appreciation for the way in which the particular subjectivity of the author makes a difference, and part of that subjectivity is bound in place. That is to say, it is important to realize my own location as author in writing this particular chapter in a cultural geography companion, as a middle-aged, white, male, US-trained scholar, at once an individual yet also influenced by the times and places I have studied (and have studied in), and so my chapter is likely to be different from the chapter immediately following this, which is written by a scholar much younger than I, who learned her cultural geography in a different time, and in a different place – in Britain to be precise; and those facts will, to a degree, differentiate our approaches to ‘cultural geography.’ Yet, in the end, we share a similar substantive interest in a number of topics that somehow cohere around the concepts of culture and geography, which are embodied in how, as scholars and citizens-of-the-world, we know and interrogate the world around us. We belong to a discursive or textual community; we identify with an academic discipline.

And so, after all of the caveats that mark these opening paragraphs, we are still left begging the historiographical questions: what cultural traditions and why do they matter? Without immediately taking a position on just what, exactly, cultural geography is (that is the purpose of this entire volume, after all), we can begin by acknowledging that there has been for the better part of a century, something recognized as cultural geography, especially in an American (here to mean US) context (thus it has a genealogy), which has served, more recently, as the intellectual foil (the conceptual other) that, in concert with a general disciplinary engagement with postempiricist and postpositivist epistemologies and ontologies, has helped to foster renewed (international) interests in something else called cultural geography. And while two (hypothetical) geographical scholars, each practicing their own cultural geography – one traditional, one new – and separated by the distance of 80 years and an ocean or two, might not necessarily recognize in each other’s work an intellectual kinship apparent to us today, it is in making that kinship apparent, especially through institutional or disciplinary frameworks, that this chapter is interested. With full realization of the normative, teleological, and place-bound problematics of claiming a genealogy, I present here a few signposts toward understanding traditions and the place of traditions in cultural geography, primarily in an attempt to move from traditions to continuities to connections with the broadened interest in something called cultural geography in the Anglophone world.

Traditional cultural geography, as it is now known, was not called traditional cultural geography until ‘it’ became the focus or subject of scholarly critique over 20 years ago. It is through the nexus of critique, in this case positing a ‘traditional’ versus a ‘new’ cultural geography, that core disciplinary ideas are identified and refined, honed and retooled to meet the needs of contemporary scholars. And while critique is often seen as attack, resulting in an abandonment of the old, it also is important to remember that there had to be something intellectually valuable in
the old to merit the attack in the first place, a set of concepts or substantive foci that are worth ‘fighting over.’ It is always dangerous, of course, to assume that a tradition of any kind is monolithic – that all practitioners who might be identified with a discipline think and act alike and are cast from the same mold. Yet key thinkers can always be identified, canonical works cited (and citations counted), and ideas can thus be traced to ascertain their dissemination and influence. In US cultural geography, the undisputed progenitor of cultural geography was Carl O. Sauer, often identified as the ‘leader’ of the Berkeley School of Cultural Geography (although like most such labels, this one was not self-ascribed, but assigned as a sort-of disciplinary shorthand for Sauer and his students and his devotees). Sauerian or Berkeley School Geography has served as a narrative for both approaches to ‘tradition’ which opened this essay: as a foil and as a genealogy to be revered. The mediation of those two approaches has been called a ‘civil war’ in cultural geography (Duncan 1994), and that civil war at the very least served as a forum for a set of debates that helped to clarify the various paths toward today’s cultural geographies. With the privilege of hindsight, I take the position here that such debates – as long as they do not devolve into ad hominem attacks or overly vitriolic exchanges or hagiographic battles over patriarchy – are a good thing, for they mark an intellectual invigoration that ‘keeps us honest’ as scholars, making us always careful to elucidate and explicate our conceptual and theoretical positions, always accountable to the implications and ramifications of our scholarly practice. This, of course, is also a hallmark of a critical human geography more generally understood, wherein scholarship is seen never to be ‘value free’ and always carries with it (or should) what Gregory (1994) calls the anticipatory utopian moment. But to get to that point is to skip the beginning, and for many cultural geographers, the beginning is Sauer.

Carl Sauer was a prodigious scholar, and was perhaps an iconoclast who defies categorization. His academic career spanned over six decades, and one can hardly expect to pin down a thinking, active intellect over such a long period. But it is important, too, to remember that what we are after is key ideas rather than the essence of a particular man’s scholarship, and while Sauer wrote many essays and books, a very few of them have come to stand above the others as disciplinary hallmarks, perhaps none more than ‘The Morphology of Landscape,’ published in 1925, when Sauer was relatively new to the Berkeley Geography department, having recently arrived from his Midwestern origins. ‘Morphology of Landscape’ is a highly sophisticated piece of theoretical rumination that still bears reading today. Its argument is multifaceted, but its most famous maxim posits the cultural landscape as the result of culture’s action upon the medium of nature, and it is from that point that much of the recent critique evolved. It is the theoretical ramifications of ‘Morphology’ in a postpositivist intellectual milieu that have served as foil or conceptual other for the new cultural geography, particularly through a renewed interest in the concept of cultural landscapes from the 1980s. The place of a Sauerian or Berkeley School conception of landscape and culture vis-à-vis the new cultural geography is well documented elsewhere and so demands only a brief précis here (see, for example: Mitchell this volume; Cosgrove 1984, 2000a; Jackson 1989; McDowell 1994; Duncan 1990; Kobayashi 1989; Hugill & Foote 1994).

‘Morphology of Landscape’ (1925) was written in part as a result of Sauer’s dissatisfaction with the then-dominant perspective of environmental determinism,
especially as found in the work of Ellen Churchill Semple and Harlan Barrows. Sauer turned to Continental philosophy for philosophical guidance, his colleagues in Anthropology at Berkeley for theories of culture, and wrote ‘Morphology’ as part of “an effort to ‘emancipate’ himself from determinist thinking” (Williams 1983: 5). Sauer later claimed that methodological statements like ‘Morphology’ were part of an ongoing and shifting methodological position to which he rarely referred once they were written. Instead, he wrote, “they are best considered as successive orientations and have had utility as such; they belong to the history of geography, and if they are any good they represent change and growth” (as quoted in Williams 1983: 2).

While Sauer’s position on theoretical and methodological change and growth is laudable, it is a highly personal statement and raises the question of how a wider readership responds to the writings of influential scholars. For example, ‘Morphology’ stood for several generations as a widely cited programmatic statement, and its influence still persists in some arenas of cultural geography today (look for it especially in introductory textbooks prepared for the US market). Additionally, Sauer’s actual approach to the cultural landscape, as well as the work of his intellectual and scholarly ‘offspring,’ has been the subject of critique for a number of reasons. Cosgrove (1983: 2), for example, has suggested that “in the face of a strong determinism in geography” Sauer (along with Vidal) “laid emphasis on human culture as itself a deterministic force in transforming nature,” and this emphasis was taken up by cultural geographers in general, especially those interrogating cultural landscapes. It is interesting in light of today’s concern with the role of landscape as part and parcel of social (or socio-spatial) process, that Sauer’s conception of the cultural landscape initially depended upon “apprehending the relationship between nature and culture dialectically, giving to neither an absolute dominance within a linear, determinist form of explanation” (Cosgrove 1983: 3). Nevertheless, Cosgrove continues,

Sauer’s early insistence upon regarding human geography as a positive science (1925) and the methodological position he then espoused has been more readily followed than his concern with process, other than in studies of diffusion. The dialectic was not mediated through the historical specificity of human production, so that it dissolved into either the idealist reification of culture as an agent of change, or a semi-determinism dignified by the name “possibilism.” (Cosgrove 1983: 3)

This, according to Cosgrove, “has left cultural geography theoretically impoverished, many of its studies existing in a theoretical vacuum, preserving a sense of cultural significance in understanding the landscape, but failing to extend this into a developing theoretical discourse” (Cosgrove 1983: 3).

A reified concept of culture in the practice of landscape interpretation may be traced to Sauer’s (1925 [1963]: 343) ‘Morphology,’ where he wrote that “culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result.” Duncan (1980) has shown that this concept of culture has had wide import in the arena of landscape interpretation, and he has written on the implications of such a “superorganic” concept of culture. Duncan (1980: 181) claims that “the superorganic mode of explanation in cultural geography reifies the notion of culture, assign-