A companion to Critical and Cultural Theory

Edited by Imre Szeman, Sarah Blacker, and Justin Sully

Wiley Blackwell
Contents

Contributors ix
Acknowledgments xv
Introduction xvii
Imre Szeman, Sarah Blacker, and Justin Sully

Part I Lineages 1

1 Frankfurt – New York – San Diego 1924–1968; or, Critical Theory 3
   Andrew Pendakis

2 Vienna 1899 – Paris 1981; or, Psychoanalysis 25
   James Penney

3 Paris 1955–1968; or, Structuralism 41
   Sean Homer

4 Birmingham – Urbana-Champaign 1964–1990; or, Cultural Studies 59
   Paul Smith

5 Baltimore – New Haven 1966–1983; or, Deconstruction 73
   Michael O’Driscoll

   or, Gender and Sexuality 91
   Sarah Brophy

7 Delhi/Ahmednagar Fort – Washington, DC/Birmingham Jail –
   Pretoria/Robben Island 1947–1994; or, Race, Colonialism, Postcolonialism 115
   Neil ten Kortenaar

8 Petrograd/Leningrad – Havana – Beijing 1917–1991; or, Marxist Theory
   and Socialist Practice 129
   Peter Hitchcock
9 Chile – Seattle – Cairo 1973–2017?; or, Globalization and Neoliberalism 147
   Myka Tucker-Abramson

Part II Problematics 167
Section A: Living and Laboring 167

10 Subjectivity 173
   William Callison

11 Diaspora and Migration 191
   Ghassan Hage

12 Community, Collectivity, Affinities 205
   Miranda Joseph

13 Feminism 223
   Rosemary Hennessy

14 Gender and Queer Theory 243
   Amber Jamilla Musser

15 Social Divisions and Hierarchies 255
   Randy Martin

16 Work and Precarity 269
   Jason Read

Section B: Being and Knowing 283

17 Religion and Secularism 287
   Jerilyn Sambrooke

18 Affect 301
   Marija Cetinić and Jeff Diamanti

19 Indigenous Epistemes 313
   Rauna Kuokkanen

20 The Everyday, Taste, Class 327
   Ben Highmore

21 Disability Studies 339
   Anna Mollow
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Unsound</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Veit Erlmann</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Screen Life</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Toby Miller</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Digital and New Media</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wendy Hui Kyong Chun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Science and Technology</td>
<td>403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Priscilla Wald</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Section C: Structures of Agency and Belonging</strong></td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Circulation</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Will Straw</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Cultural Production</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sarah Brouillette</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Decolonization</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jennifer Wenzel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Race and Ethnicity</td>
<td>465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Min Hyoung Song</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Humanism</td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nina Power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stephanie LeMenager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Scale</td>
<td>503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Justin Sully</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marie-Laure Ryan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>531</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contributors

Sarah Blacker is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin. Her research uses cultural analysis, historical, and ethnographic methods to explore the politics of race and ethnicity in public health and genomics.

Sarah Brophy is Professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. She has contributed to journals such as a/b: Auto/Biography Studies, Contemporary Women's Writing, Interventions, Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies, and PMLA. She is the author of Witnessing AIDS: Writing, Testimony, and the Work of Mourning (2004), and, with Janice Hladki, co-editor of Embodied Politics in Visual Autobiography (2014).

Sarah Brouillette is Professor in the Department of English at Carleton University, where she teaches contemporary literature alongside topics in cultural theory and social and political thought. She is the author of Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace (2007) and Literature and the Creative Economy (2014).

William Callison is a PhD candidate in political science with designated emphasis in critical theory at the University of California, Berkeley. He is special issue editor of “Rethinking Sovereignty and Capitalism” in the journal Qui Parle, co-editor of “Europe at a Crossroads” on the website Near Futures Online, and co-editor of a forthcoming collected volume on neoliberalism and biopolitics.

Marija Cetinić is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at York University. Her dissertation was a comparative study of sadness as a characteristic mood in recent American and Southeast European fiction. Signs of Autumn: The Aesthetics of Saturation, her current project, focuses on the concept of saturation, and on developing its implications for the relation of contemporary art and aesthetics to political economy.

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun is Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. She is author of Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics (2006), Programmed Visions: Software and Memory (2011), and Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media (2016). She is working on a monograph entitled Discriminating Data: Neighborhoods, Proxies, Individuals.
Jeff Diamanti is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Media@McGill at McGill University, and is the co-editor of Contemporary Marxist Theory as well as the forthcoming collections on Materialism and the Critique of Energy (MCM Prime Press), The Bloomsbury Companion to Marx, and a special double issue of Resilience on “Climate Realism.”

Veit Erlmann is an anthropologist/ethnomusicologist and the Endowed Chair of Music History at the University of Texas at Austin. He has published widely on music and popular culture in South Africa, including African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance; Nightsong: Performance, Power and Practice in South Africa; and Music, Modernity and the Global Imagination: South Africa and the West. His most recent publication is Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality (2010). Currently he is working on a book on intellectual property law in the South African music industry.

Ghassan Hage is Professor of Anthropology and Social Theory at the University of Melbourne. His recent books are Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination (2015) and Is Racism an Environmental Threat? (2017).

Rosemary Hennessy is L. H. Favrot Professor of Humanities, Professor of English, and Director of the Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Rice University. Her recent books are Fires on the Border: The Passionate Politics of Labor Organizing on the Mexican Frontera (2013) and Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism (2000).

Ben Highmore is Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex. His most recent books are Culture: Key Ideas in Media and Cultural Studies (2016) and The Great Indoors: At Home in the Modern British House (2014). The books The Art of Brutalism: Rescuing Hope from Catastrophe in 1950s Britain and Cultural Feelings: Mood, Mediation, and Cultural Politics are being published in 2017.

Peter Hitchcock is a Professor of English at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His books include Labor in Culture: Worker of the World(s); Dialogics of the Oppressed; Oscillate Wildly; Imaginary States; and The Long Space. He has also co-edited a book on the new public intellectual. Hitchcock is currently completing a study on the world according to postcoloniality.

Sean Homer is Professor of Film and Literature at the American University in Bulgaria. He is author of Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism (1998), the Routledge Critical Thinkers introduction to Jacques Lacan (2005), and Slavoj Žižek and Radical Politics (2016). He is currently writing a book on Balkan cinema, history, and cultural trauma.

Miranda Joseph, Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies, University of Arizona, is the author of Debt to Society: Accounting for Life Under Capitalism (2014) and Against the Romance of Community (2002).

Rauna Kuokkanen (Sámi from Finland) is Associate Professor of Political Science and Indigenous Studies at the University of Toronto. She is the author of Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes and the Logic of the Gift (2007) and Boaris dego eana: Eamiålmg ioutil diehtu, filosofijat ja dutkan (As Old as the Earth: Indigenous Knowledge, Philosophies and Research) (2009). Her most recent book, Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination and Governance in Canada, Greenland and Scandinavia (forthcoming in 2017), is an indigenous feminist examination of indigenous politics.

Stephanie LeMenager is Barbara and Carlisle Moore Professor of English and Professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Oregon. Her publications include the books Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century; Manifest and Other Destinies; and the co-edited collections Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century; Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities; and (forthcoming) Literature and Environment: Critical and Primary Sources. Her forthcoming monograph treats the role of the humanities in the era of global climate change. She is a founding editor of Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities.

Randy Martin was Professor and Chair of Art and Public Policy at New York University. Recent books include Under New Management: Universities, Administrative Labor, and the Professional Turn (2011), An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management (2007), and Financialization of Daily Life (2002). He passed away in 2015.

Toby Miller is Emeritus Distinguished Professor, University of California, Riverside; Sir Walter Murdoch Professor of Cultural Policy Studies, Murdoch University; Professor Invitado, Universidad del Norte; Professor of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University/Prifysgol Caerdydd; and Director of the Institute of Media and Creative Industries, Loughborough University London. He has written and edited over forty books.

Anna Mollow is the co-editor, with Robert McRuer, of Sex and Disability (Duke, 2012) and the co-editor, with Merri Lisa Johnson, of DSM-CRIP (Social Text Online, 2013). Her essays on disability, queerness, feminism, race, and fatness have appeared, or are forthcoming, in African American Review; Body Politics: Zeitschrift für Körpersgeschichte; Hypatia: Journal of Feminist Philosophy; The Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies; WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly; MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States; The Disability Studies Reader; Michigan Quarterly Review; Disability Studies Quarterly; Bitch magazine; Autostraddle; Everyday Feminism; and Huffington Post.

Amber Jamilla Musser is Assistant Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. She is the author of Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism (2014) and is currently at work on a project entitled “Brown Jouissance” on race, femininity, and fleshiness.

Michael O’Driscoll is Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, where he is also Associate Dean of Research and editor of
ESC: English Studies in Canada. He teaches and publishes in the fields of critical and cultural theories with a particular emphasis on deconstruction and psychoanalysis, and his expertise in twentieth-century American literature focuses particularly on poetry and poetics. He has published in journals such as Modernism/modernity, Contemporary Literature, Studies in the Literary Imagination, and Mosaic.

Andrew Pendakis is Assistant Professor of Theory and Rhetoric at Brock University and a Research Fellow at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics. His research focuses broadly on contemporary liberal culture with a special interest in the genealogy of centrist reason in the West. He is a co-editor of Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader and presently at work on a monograph entitled Critique of Centrist Reason.

James Penney is the author of After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics (2014), The Structures of Love: Art and Politics beyond the Transference (2012), and The World of Perversion: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Absolute of Desire (2006). He is Professor of Cultural Studies and French at Trent University, Canada.

Nina Power is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Roehampton and Tutor in Critical Writing in Art and Design at the Royal College of Art.

Jason Read is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern Maine. He is the author of The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present (SUNY 2003) and The Politics of Transindividuality (Brill 2015/Haymarket 2016). He has published essays on Spinoza, Deleuze, Foucault, and The Wire.

Marie-Laure Ryan is an independent scholar based in Colorado. She is the author of Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory (1991), Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media (2001, 2nd edition 2015), Avatars of Story (2006), and Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative (2016, with Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu). Her scholarly work has earned her the Prize for Independent Scholars and the Jeanne and Aldo Scaglione Prize for Comparative Literature, both from the Modern Language Association, and she has been the recipient of Guggenheim and NEA fellowships.

Jerilyn Sambrooke is a PhD candidate in the Rhetoric Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research focuses on figurations of religious fanaticism in contemporary fiction. She works at the intersection of literary studies, political theory, anthropology, and philosophy.

Paul Smith teaches in the Cultural Studies PhD program at George Mason University. He is author of many books including Discerning the Subject (1988), Millennial Dreams: Culture and Capital in the North (1997), and Primitive America: The Ideology of Capitalist Democracy (2007), and he has edited several volumes including The Renewal of Cultural Studies (2011). He is currently working on a book about deglobalization.

Will Straw is Professor within the Department of Art History and Communications Studies at McGill University in Montreal. He is the author of *Cyanide and Sin: Visualizing Crime in 1950s America*, and co-editor of several books, including *Circulation and the City: Essays on Urban Culture*.

Justin Sully is Adjunct Professor in the Department of Communication, Popular Culture, and Film at Brock University. He is currently working on a book on the popular culture of statistics.

Imre Szeman conducts research on energy and the environment, and on the cultures of contemporary capitalism. Recent books include *After Oil* (co-writer), *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (co-editor), and *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (co-editor).

Myka Tucker-Abramson is a lecturer in contemporary literature at King’s College London. Her research explores the relationship between post-World War II U.S. novels, urban renewal projects, and the rise of neoliberalism.

Priscilla Wald is R. Florence Brinkley Professor of English and Margaret Taylor Smith Director of the Program in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke University. Her books include *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008) and *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (1995). She is currently at work on a book-length study entitled *Human Being After Genocide*.

Jennifer Wenzel is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature and the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University. She is the author of *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (2009), and the co-editor, with Imre Szeman and Patricia Yaeger, of *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (2017).
Acknowledgments

We thank David Janzen for his exemplary editorial assistance throughout the later stages of this project. His help with the preparation of the manuscript and a number of other tasks made the completion of a large volume immeasurably easier. We thank, too, Adam Carlson and Valérie Savard for their meticulous work on the final version of the manuscript.

Emma Bennett, Bridget Jennings, Ben Thatcher, and Liz Wingett at Wiley have enthusiastically supported this project from its earliest stages. We thank them for their commitment to our vision for the book as they skillfully shepherded this project to completion. Many thanks go to Rajalakshmi Nadarajan for her support during the volume’s production.

Our profound thanks go to the anonymous reviewer for their meticulous reading and exceptionally fine notes at the final stages of this project. Needless to say, all errors that remain in the text are our own.

We are grateful to all of the contributors to this book for surpassing our expectations with their brilliant work. We extend particular gratitude to Andrew Pendakis for stepping in with little notice when a gap arose just as we were approaching publication.

This book could not have been completed without the financial support of the Faculty of Arts, the Department of English and Film Studies, and the Canada Research Chair in Cultural Studies at the University of Alberta. Work on this project was also supported by research grants and fellowships from the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (Blacker) and the University of Bonn (Sully).
Introduction
Imre Szeman, Sarah Blacker, and Justin Sully

[Thought] is no longer theoretical. As soon as it functions it offends or reconciles, attracts or repels, breaks, dissociates, unites or reunites; it cannot help but liberate and enslave. Even before prescribing, suggesting a future, saying what must done, even before exhorting or merely sounding an alarm, thought, at the level of its existence, in its very dawning, is in itself an action – a perilous act.
—Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (357)

Though both critical and cultural theory have undergone innumerable changes since the term “critical theory” first started to be used in conjunction with the work of the Frankfurt School (Institut für Sozialforschung) in the 1930s, the impulse and imperative guiding the activity of theory remains the one named bluntly by the School’s director, Max Horkheimer: “Its goal is man’s emancipation from slavery” (1975, 246). We might be tempted to imagine that the knowledges generated by cultural, social, and political inquiry over the past several centuries – a process still best captured in the drama of human maturity that Immanuel Kant named as the answer to the question of “What is Enlightenment?” – have taken us a long way towards this goal, if not having achieved it altogether. But we would be wrong to accede to this temptation. The quotidian, commonsense view that, over the course of time, the world has become more democratic and equitable is a powerful one; it has maintained its hold on our imaginations in the face of all manner of evidence to the contrary. The tasks of achieving genuine emancipation, real autonomy, vibrant democratic self-rule, active civic participation, and true social justice – these tasks, among many others central to the activity of politics, remain incomplete. We can (and should) argue over exactly what constitutes emancipation, and we can (and should) challenge the presumptions that have long made “man” a too easy substitute for “human” (as in Horkheimer’s phrase above). But the point remains: there is still an enormous amount of work to be done for the planet’s population to attain the capacities, possibilities, and opportunities that one might want it to possess, individually and collectively.

The work of generating new knowledge cannot but contribute to the project of emancipation. But if, as the saying goes, “knowledge will set you free,” critical and cultural theory has attended to all of the ways in which the great and expanding systems of knowledge of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were also able to entrap us. What
makes critical theory “critical” is its ceaseless interrogation of the processes by which knowledge gets transformed into doxa. Critical theorists have approached the problem of particular forms of knowledge being rendered as “natural” and “inevitable,” and their circulation as common sense, from a number of different angles, many of which are addressed in the contributions to this Companion. As distinct from (say) political philosophy or social theory, which might also attend to the generation of what Antonio Gramsci described as the “spontaneous consent” of hegemony, critical and cultural theory names a range of theoretical and conceptual approaches to the mechanisms through which some knowledges are rendered into common sense within the space of culture, broadly defined. Even a quick glance at the titles of the chapters collected in this volume underlines the degree to which “culture, broadly defined” has expanded to include zones of social life quite incompatible with any notion of culture that circulated fifty years ago. This insatiably incorporative, interdisciplinary drive in critical and cultural theory is not new, nor are the attendant problems that continue to emerge at the margins of “culture” as it abuts, intersects, and melds with the political, economic, biological, and informational. In this sense, to analyze the cultural reproduction of hegemonic common sense – that discursive mechanism that filters our worlds into meaningful statements, calculable information and knowledge – is to work at softening the edges of categorical distinctions. The site- and thematically specific analyses collected in this Companion endeavor to understand how particular social orders are naturalized and reified through the cementing of social hierarchies in places that often appear to be distinct from politics per se and the terrain upon which inequalities are reproduced – sites such as identity, race and ethnicity, the body, popular culture, and affect – but which, in fact, constitute the most important spaces of the political today.

The chapters that follow describe the analytics used by theorists to render these processes of naturalization and reification legible for critique, highlighting how emancipation requires a thorough grasp of the increasingly complex mechanisms of cultural and social life today.

The modern period is defined by nothing if not the creation of a division of labor that produces intellectuals responsible for generating and safeguarding expert knowledge. These systems of expertise concern the natural world, with its many laws and axioms, but equally the social world and the operations of subjectivity. For all their disagreement, the most influential theorists of the past two centuries are bound together in their assault upon the self-certainties of knowledge as it becomes systemized and, in the process, transformed into a form of expertise whose commitment is no longer to the task of emancipation, but of securing the social and political power granted to expert knowledge. From Karl Marx’s interrogation of political economy to Sigmund Freud’s investigation of rationality and subjectivity, and from Judith Butler’s examination of the constitution of gender to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s exploration of subalternity and the problems of representation – each advances claims about the order of things that aim to unsettle scientisms and simple positivisms; each wants to show the ways in which power seizes hold of knowledge to define reality for the benefit of some and to the detriment of everyone else. The systems of expert knowledge that underwrite modern experience are ineluctably bound up with the emergence of the modern state, which has exerted its power, through direct domination, “the technologies of the self,” or via the political rationality that Foucault described as “governmentality.” The modern university is both a product and an instrument of this bureaucratic system of knowledge
Introduction

production and management. “The state,” Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, “has the power to orient intellectual production by means of subsidies, commissions, promotion, honorific posts, even decorations, all of which are for speaking or keeping silent, for compromise or abstention” (1984, 17). Against these operations in support of the official knowledge stand critical and cultural theorists – figures who ceaselessly “struggle against the forms of power that transform [them] into its object and instrument in the sphere of ‘knowledge,’ ‘truth,’ ‘consciousness,’ and ‘discourse’” (Foucault in Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 208).

Innumerable volumes that set out to track developments in critical and cultural theory have tended with surprising consistency to stage and affirm it as an area of expertise, one that (given what we've just said above) critical theory would itself need to immediately challenge for the way in which it transforms knowledge into static dispositifs of a technocratic kind. This is why students and researchers alike have come to imagine the practice of cultural analysis as being divided up into a set of discrete methodological choices from which they can choose as if choosing tools from a toolbox. Even more problematically, these choices are all too often imagined as – and indeed, in practice all too often are – guided by personal preference, rather than motivated by the critical work demanded by the problems encountered. A real danger of a book such as this resides in this tendency to further reinforce the idea that work of critical theory consists of self-identification with a specific approach or cohort of researchers (“I’m a Marxist” or “I’m a feminist”). To avoid this, this Companion has been shaped to emphasize critical and cultural theory’s capacities to challenge the language of expertise across the disciplines, and, in doing so, to draw attention to the range of ways it engages in the collective project of emancipation.

Gathering together some of the most widely read and innovative theorists working today, A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory collects thirty-three essays designed to illuminate the topics that dominate theoretical debate today and, we anticipate, for some time to come. In framing the book around the problems and issues animating contemporary discourse, we have worked at every stage to ensure that each chapter provides a sense of the longer history of these conversations in order to reflect the massive work of synthesis that has shaped critical and cultural theory as it exists today. At the same time, our hope is that by shifting focus away from the more familiar “approaches” to theory, this book will provide readers with fresh perspectives on both familiar and under-theorized questions and topics animating the field of contemporary critical and cultural theory. Capturing the dynamism of contemporary theory, the essays collected here present a comprehensive account of the ways in which the study of literature, culture, and social practices has been, and continues to be, challenged by the conceptual and political energies of critical and cultural theory.

The book is divided into two sections, entitled “Lineages” and “Problematics.” Taken together, these sections are designed to provide a genealogy of critical and cultural theory that highlights its heterogeneous geographical, cultural, and theoretical influences (“Lineages”), while also foregrounding the issues and problems animating contemporary theoretical discourse (“Problematics”). The first section traces the movement of ideas in critical and cultural theory across space and time. The main theoretical movement or school each chapter addresses is included in the chapter title; however, instead of offering an encyclopedia-like overview, we have encouraged contributors to develop a narrative shaped around a specific vector of dates and places significant for
the development of that school, movement, or orientation in theoretical discourse. By encouraging authors to narrate the intellectual history of critical and cultural theory through a set of concrete events and contexts, we aim to emphasize the way in which the foundational concepts and topoi of contemporary theoretical discourse (e.g., mediation, representation, ideology, and identity) are formed conjuncturally as part of a larger drama of personalities, institutions, political struggles, and social and cultural contexts.

Instead of beginning with “the Frankfurt School,” or “Deconstruction,” for instance, chapters in this first section of the book present a more situated history of the events, disagreements, and migrations out of which these familiar schools of thought arose. From this perspective, the time and space of origin of some of these key movements are surprisingly contained. In Sean Homer’s account, structuralism is a Parisian theory, developed out of debates between French thinkers about epistemology and the history of science; as it migrates to the United States via the important 1966 Johns Hopkins University conference, “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” and in the wake of civil unrest in France in May 1968, the originary energies and commitments of structuralism drain away. Other theories live more global lives. Neil ten Kortenaar narrates the development of colonial and postcolonial theory through three key speeches – by Jawaharlal Nehru (1947), Martin Luther King (1963), and Nelson Mandela (1964) – each with a distinct aim: the first to kick off the development of a new constitution, the second to motivate a mass demonstration in the U.S. capital, and the third to indict those whose racism allows them to imagine they are enacting some perverse form of justice. Behind the cities in which these speeches are given – Delhi, Washington, and Pretoria – lurks a second set of spaces equally (if not more) important to the narrative of the development of postcolonial theory – Ahmednagar Fort, Birmingham Jail, and Robben Island – the names of the prisons in which each figure was held. In the case of postcolonialism, theory and history are folded together in such a way that it would be impossible to grasp the dynamics that have shaped its commitments and politics without attention to the narrative of political and racial emancipation out of which it emerged. Providing a sense of the complex historical foundation of critical and cultural theory itself, we believe the conjunctural approach of the “Lineages” section generates new critical-theoretical accounts of influences, affiliations, and connections, both within intellectual currents and in relation to broader developments in culture, society, and politics.

Let us be clear: the point of these named beginnings and ends is not to identify the birth or death of specific critical movements, or to speak to high points in the life of ideas (after which they’ve since faded away), as might seem to be the case. We are not implying (for instance) that the era of cultural studies lasts from the founding of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (1964) to the 1990 conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign that resulted in the book Cultural Studies (1991), or that analyses of gender and sexuality begin with Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949) and end with Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990). These would be bizarre claims in both cases. In many respects, 1990 marks not the end of cultural studies but its full appearance on the intellectual scene: the moment when it arrives in the United States and becomes an important, ongoing approach to the study of culture. So, too, with respect to the study of gender and sexuality: Butler’s influential book is an index of the reinvigorated critique of gender in the 1980s and 1990s, one that informs some of the most vibrant forms of critical cultural analysis today. The aim is for these chapters to offer broad histories of critical and cultural theory by focusing on a
dominant moment or trajectory, against which other developments can be measured, assessed, and contextualized. As Sarah Brophy puts it in her sweeping account of the crystallization of gender and sexuality as objects of theoretical inquiry, “the legacies of 1949–1990 are incendiary – desiring, passion-infused, world-transforming … thinkers in this period imagined ways of collectively and individually resisting gender and sexual oppression and rethought the very constitution of gender and sexuality.” Overall, we hope that this section will provide an exciting history of the moments and passages of critical and cultural theory around the globe in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one which will give readers a sharper sense of the contexts out of which it has emerged, and its ongoing significance for literary and cultural studies writ large.

The second section, called “Problematics,” also introduces a new way of characterizing and conceiving of the what and the why of contemporary theory. This section provides an overview of critical and cultural theory by tracing the key problems and issues that the field engages. As these chapters make plain, the conversations driving critical and cultural theory today rarely conform to schools of thought (structuralism, post-structuralism, etc.) or to allegiances of individual theorists (Badiou, Butler, Haraway, etc.). Grouped together by analytical orientation into three sub-sections (“Living and Laboring,” “Being and Knowing,” and “Structures of Agency and Belonging”), the essays on problematics cut across the field’s existing debates, foci, and subfields, with the aim of capturing the horizontal, collaborative production of theory, and in so doing highlight new questions and approaches in critical and cultural theory. By tracking dominant problems of critical and cultural theory, this volume again moves away from the idea of theory as blunt method, instead drawing attention to how and why theory originates out of questions and issues animating contemporary cultural, social, and political life. In this way, we believe that this volume better captures the issues that have given shape and direction to literary and cultural studies since World War II. Despite the tremendous level of innovation that characterizes writing in theory today, most recent volumes published as “guides” or “companions” to critical and cultural theory have done little to address the degree to which debates have changed since the theoretical “turns” of the 1980s and 1990s. A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory offers its readers a sense of the sharp and sophisticated investigations that are taking place on a whole range of issues: community, work, race, indigeneity, the everyday, disability, science, nature, narrative – much more.

An important analytical framework deployed by many of the Companion’s chapters is a Foucauldian one that draws attention to the ubiquity and seeming banality of power as it circulates on a micro scale, constituting our everyday lives without much fanfare. Contributors to this book hone in on the mechanisms through which a power–knowledge nexus produces and naturalizes our lived realities, encapsulating them with an impenetrable sense of necessity that all too often inhibits critique and our ability to imagine otherwise. In grappling with and analyzing the function of the myriad “regimes of truth” that produce our commonsense understandings of who we are and what is worth striving for, each chapter models methods through which we can trace the work of power as it produces knowledge through discourse, institutions, science, law, and popular culture. These chapters follow Foucault, too, in their emphasis on the productive capacities of power, rather than focusing solely on its repressive aspect. An important outcome of Foucault’s emphasis on the mechanisms through which power produces social orders and regimes of truth is an opening through which work in critical and
cultural theory can address not only the modalities of oppression that produce forms of inequality, but also the modes through which knowledge is produced that allows concepts of difference to begin to be legible in the first place. To look at one example, in his chapter on “Race and Ethnicity,” Min Hyoung Song discusses how neoliberal humanism works to naturalize inequality by rendering race a category of identity, thereby obscuring histories of exploitation. Song’s own aim to demonstrate how “inequalities are historically produced” does not, however, necessitate doing away with the concept of race, in the name of which so much harm has been done. He critiques the neoliberal “post-racial” society and the forms of historical amnesia it promotes, arguing instead that just as the concept of race holds within it the capacity to enact violence, the concept also holds value because it allows us to name these forms of oppression, to analyze the forms of power that produce these forms of oppression, and to develop forms of resistance to counter the endemic forms of devaluation that allowed racialization to emerge and flourish as an epistemology and form of social control.

The attempt to “culturalize” inequalities so that they appear natural and inevitable in any given social order also raises familiar, but no less troubling questions for cultural theory. How should we understand the relationship between culture and the economy? While the base–superstructure model has been widely critiqued as reductive, the question of how to understand the role of a political-economic system and its dynamic relationship with the social order as it informs culture remains a pressing one. To continue with the example of Song’s chapter, it is important to examine how among the conditions of possibility for the development and flourishing of capitalism was a culture of racialization in which groups of people were understood to be biologically distinct from one another; the cultural entrenchment of this hierarchization allowed for racist practices that supported the development of capitalism, from the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the mechanisms through which the present-day criminalization and imprisonment of racialized Americans keeps the U.S. prison-industrial complex afloat. Many of the chapters in this Companion situate the problematics they address within a clearly defined political-economic context, and they productively problematize any simple notions of how this “base” and the cultural forms in question shape one another. Moving well beyond the once-dogmatic trio of modalities of oppression — of race, class, and gender — these chapters also explore more complex social forms arising out of power’s productive capacities.

In an era in which knowledge is being both produced and obscured at a rate faster than we — or our new companion species, the big data aggregator — can adequately interpret, some believe that we have reached the limits of critical and cultural theory’s capacity to remain a generative practice. In “The Misadventures of Critical Thought,” Jacques Rancière comments that many now believe we’re at the end of “the tradition of social and cultural critique my generation grew up in” (Rancière 2009, 26). “Once we could have fun denouncing the dark, solid reality concealed behind the brilliance of appearances,” he writes. “But today there is allegedly no longer any solid reality to counter-pose to the reign of appearances, nor any dark reverse side to the opposed to the triumph of consumer society” (26). Rancière doesn’t believe claims about the end of social and cultural critique are correct; and if for different and distinct reasons — as many as the voices, outlooks, and critical vantage points collected here attest — neither do the authors in this Companion.

We are living through an exceptionally challenging time in which new mechanisms of knowledge production and circulation, together with those economic and political
practices that have been termed “neoliberalism,” are threatening many of those small achievements that have been made in the name of emancipation. In her book *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown reminds us “democracy can be undone, hollowed out from within, not only overthrown or stymied by anti-democrats. And desire for democracy is neither given nor incorruptible; indeed, even democratic theorists such as Rousseau and Mill acknowledge the difficulty of crafting democratic spirits from the material of European modernity” (2015, 18). Contemporary critical and cultural theory reminds us that democratic life – even of the impoverished variety found in most actually existing forms of representative democracy – is not achieved simply by the forward momentum of history. And it provides us with the vocabularies and vantage points from which we can – we must – continue to challenge the myriad ways in which we are asked to accept as given the concepts and practices that power has shaped into our commonsense understanding of the world. Emancipation is too important a task to be left behind or left undone; we hope this book gives impetus to projects of critical and cultural theory that will help shape what we are into what we want to be.

**Note**

1 The reference here is to Jeffrey T. Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux, *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the New Humanities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). Even if it suggests too great of a fixity of theoretical approaches, the metaphor of theory as tools is far better than theory as personal preference, since specific tools are used to undertake specific tasks.

**References**


Part I

Lineages
All thoughts are zoned, but very few come to be known by the name of a place. Though Jena was the site of a remarkable flourishing of thought in the 1790s it never acquired the legacy of an eponym; similarly, the milieu called “poststructuralism” by Americans was never really a “Paris School” despite the almost total confinement of the phenomenon named by the term to that city. It would appear that neither spatial proximity, nor coevality, nor even resemblance on the terrain of ideas is enough to transform a network of thoughts into the concreteness and determinacy named by a place. It was possible for Frankfurt to become the eponym of a thought, indeed, a synonym for critical theory itself, because that thought was first a “school” – a formalized, articulated institutional machine.

A socialist benefactor whose father made his money in grain; a prudently negotiated affiliation with the University of Frankfurt; a significant network of research and administrative assistants; a spacious building constructed from scratch to house the institute: this is the infrastructural unconscious of perhaps the most comprehensive critique of “administered life” ever developed (Marcuse 2012, 50). Critical theory survived the myriad (mortal) risks of its time, in part on the basis of the durability and material effectiveness of its institutional form. This is neither a guiltily smoking (political) gun nor a banal aside. Whatever its proximity in spirit to the anti-bourgeois avant garde and to the ambient aesthetic nomads and revolutionaries of the interwar period, and however often its members were themselves forced into precarity and flight, critical theory was logistically intentional, organized, and decidedly this-worldly in its desire to intelligently anticipate the conditions for its own comfortable reproduction. Peace and quiet, a certain institutionalized refuge from disruption (and from the disruption of institutions themselves, the endless meetings and obligations of the traditional university form) are consistently framed by Theodor Adorno as the sine qua non of thought in an age of mass distraction: “bustle endangers concentration with a thousand claims” (Adorno 2002, 29). He goes one step further: “for the intellectual, inviolable isolation is the only way of showing some measure of solidarity” (26).

There is in this a substantial departure from an earlier Marxist type, that of the vocational or professional revolutionary intellectual. For figures like Lenin, Gramsci, or Mao (and of course for Marx and Engels themselves), invention, creativity, and thought were dialectically inseparable from distraction, risk, and practice: one could only really think
in the mess of the event, in the externality and obligation – as much temporal as moral – of the demands placed on the intellectual by the political experiments of the many. Nothing could be further from the spirit of this model than Max Horkheimer’s frank admission that he “lived his life as an individualist” (1978, 13). For some, it is precisely in the schoolishness of critical theory – its buttressed existence apart – that one can discern the outlines of an enfeebled middle-class hexis, one which structures from within many of the School’s worst limits, aporias, and failures. György Lukács’s notorious 1962 suggestion that critical theory had taken up residence in the “Grand Hotel Abyss” (Lukács 1971, 22) – a phrase he originally used to characterize the “irrationalism” (Lukács 1981, 204) of Arthur Schopenhauer – turns precisely on an imagined alignment between the political pessimism of the School and its comfortable separation from the risks and intensities of actual political struggle. The abyss is not simply taken in from a (seated) distance, an object of enjoyment viewed from a vantage-point of comfort. Instead, it is to some extent produced by this watching, and in two senses: not only is the abyss history’s *sumnum malum* – everything cruel made possible by safety – it is also a direct symptom of passivity, the sadness of a body without politics (Lukács 1971).

Even for those for whom the Frankfurt School names an historical retreat from political praxis, the erudition, provocativeness, and rigor named by the term “critical theory” remains difficult to dispute. This was almost certainly the most sophisticated cultural Marxism ever produced. Its commitment to autonomy, and to an extremely rare (often austere) precision, made it possible not only to be a Marxist philosopher2 (or a Marxist in philosophy), but also to be a Marxist at all in an era of massively redrawn revolutionary horizons. Indeed, after Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Adorno, it was possible to be a Marxist not only in philosophy, but in music, literature, science, and art. The reconceptualization of theory itself as a form of praxis was a strategy of conservation, a way of remaining faithful in thought to a practice without options or agents. For some, it only abetted the collapse of twentieth-century socialist praxis, exacerbating the distance between theory and what Marx called its “material force”: the brains, bodies, and energies of the oppressed. For others, it was a necessary and principled retreat, a turning back and away that replenishes a body and gives it time to lick its wounds (Marx 1970).

**Frankfurt 1924–1935, The Welter of Method**

The Institute for Social Research opened under the directorship of Carl Grünberg in 1924 with the intention of producing a space on the margins of the German academe for the application and diffusion of Marxist social science. Its institutional structure allowed the Institute to share resources (and vital symbolic capital) with the University of Frankfurt, while at the same time granting it administrative control and effective autonomy in the domain of research. This location within and beyond the space of legitimate scholarly discourse was tactical. It was an attempt not just to (subtly) politicize the university, but also to academicize Marxism. If in the wake of the sequence linking October 1917 (in Russia) to November 1918 (in Germany) Marxism could be construed as historically ascendant, its proximity to politics compromised its claims to (positivist) scientificity by sullying its “truth-value” (the integrity of the opposition between values and facts) in the grit, specificity, and bias of mere interest. The Institute, then, was to be a space of open