

Book Reviews

CONTEMPORARY LITERARY & CULTURAL THEORY:
THE JOHNS HOPKINS GUIDE.

ED. MICHAEL GRODEN, MARTIN KREISWIRTH AND IMRE SZEMEN.
JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012. 536 PAGES.

WHEN *THE JOHNS HOPKINS GUIDE to Literary Theory and Criticism* (2nd edition) was published in 2004, Christopher Hitchens used the event to single-handedly re-ignite the ashes of the so-called “theory wars” in his now well-known 2005 *New York Times* screed (“Transgressing the Boundaries”). Now, almost a decade later, editors Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth and Imre Szeman have returned with a new offering, *The Guide to Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. *Contemporary* is both a distillation and an expansion of its tome-like predecessor, offering a useful guide to students and teachers negotiating the theoretical turns in contemporary cultural and literary theory. Where, as Mathew Biberman suggests, the publication of the *Johns Hopkins Guide* marked “the continued consolidation of theory into the academic and the cultural mainstream” (*ESC: English Studies in Canada* 1.3 [2005]: 217), its comparatively slender companion asks the question: what does it mean to *do* literary or cultural theory in the twenty-first century? Or, where have the post-1968 cultural and theory wars brought us in our current moment where the logics of neoliberal austerity reign?

Indeed, it is the culture and theory wars, rather than any temporal designation, that anchors the “contemporary” in the book’s title. There are no entries on New Criticism, poetics, or the New York Intellectuals, all of which dominated post-war literary and cultural studies. Moreover, while pre-contemporary thinkers ranging from Martin Heidegger, Georg Lukacs and Frantz Fanon all receive entries, these focus respectively on their influence in the fields of deconstruction, the Frankfurt School and post-colonialism. However, *Contemporary* is not interested in simply rehashing the theory wars, but in tracing the transformations of theory and criticism *since* the theory wars. If the theory wars offer one bookend, the neoliberalization of the university offers the other. Underpinning *Contemporary* is an implicit stance on the role and relevance of English and

Cultural Studies departments in the contemporary neoliberal university, now governed by what the Edufactory Collective has termed the “system of measure” (“Intro: University Struggles and the System of Measure.” *Edufactory* 1 [Sept. 2011]: 4). Sarah Blacker’s comprehensive section on “Science Studies” frames the problem particularly well by pointing to the “populist surge of anti-intellectualism,” which privileges the scientific and the technological and treats the literary and the theoretical as “self-indulgent” (465). *Contemporary* responds to this shift by offering a survey of the field of cultural studies in a post-cultural studies era, an era in which popular opinion holds, as Michael Bérubé argued, that “cultural studies hasn’t had much of an impact at all [except] in English departments” (“What’s the matter with cultural studies? The popular discipline has lost its bearings,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* [2009]).

The editors and contributors clearly disagree. *Contemporary* defends both the importance of theory within the academy writ large, and the ongoing importance of English departments and the humanities in producing theory. As the editors explain in the preface:

criticism as it is currently understood no longer confines itself to the study of literature: its discourses now extend well beyond literature to intersect with anthropology, philosophy, psychology, linguistics, political science, and much else besides, even as the objects of critical analysis that ‘literary’ scholars attend to encompass all forms of cultural production, literary and nonliterary. (ix)

Indeed, the entries in *Contemporary* on areas such as “Structuralism,” “Semiotics,” “Narratology” and “Psychoanalysis” all emphasize theory and criticism’s roots, which span the disciplinary boundaries of the sciences, social sciences and humanities, while entries on cross-over or interdisciplinary figures like Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Badiou, Roland Barthes, and Deleuze and Guattari both emphasize the important roles the literary and aesthetic have played in the development of their thought and theory more broadly. However, *Contemporary* does not just defend the importance of thinking theoretically: it provides a model for thinking about the overlapping, contested, and interdependent trajectories that created the theoretical canon. Its alphabetized entries are connected through highlighted key terms that recur throughout, continually placing its thinkers and theories into newly arranged constellations of thought. For instance, Caren Irr and Vincent

Pecora's entry on the "Frankfurt School" is connected not just with the obvious entries of "Sigmund Freud," "Theodor Adorno," "Walter Benjamin" and "Marxist Theory and Criticism," but is also put into dialogue with entries on "Edward Said," "Postmodernism" and "Michel Foucault." The effect of this form is to portray a field of study that is not discrete, isolated or teleological, but one that is in constant dialogue, evaluating and re-evaluating its terms.

With any compilation, there is the question of what is included and excluded, and *Contemporary* is no different. Some absences are politically questionable, such as the lack of a section on Latina/o and Chicana/o studies and Asian North American studies (although the collection does have a section on "Native Theory and Criticism"). These fields have been crucial to recent—and not so recent—theoretical developments, which have reconsidered literary and cultural production in the US, Canada and Mexico within the overlapping and fraught histories of colonialism and empire. Other omissions are simply surprising, such as the absence of an entry on affect theory. In spite of these omissions, however, this new compilation offers a useful reminder of the persistent institutional and ideational importance of cultural and literary theory across the disciplines and, more pragmatically, it offers a useful, intelligent and well-written guide to the current field of literary and cultural theory, one that would assuredly make a welcome addition on any student's, teacher's or aficionado's bookshelf.

MYKA TUCKER-ABRAMSON
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

SHIFTING THE GROUND OF CANADIAN LITERARY STUDIES.
ED. SMARO KAMBOURELI AND ROBERT ZACHARIAS.
WILDFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012. 348 PAGES. \$42.95.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE LITERARY and cultural critic in Canada? How is cultural production bound up with material and affective understandings of the state and citizenship? In our long neoliberal moment, how do we understand literary and cultural production? The recent edited collection from Smaro Kamboureli and Robert Zacharias answers these pressing questions.

Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies is the second in a series of publications that came out of the TransCanada Conferences, which took place between 2005–2009. The first, a collection of essays that stems from TransCanada One: Literature, Institutions, Citizenship, assesses the

changing shape of literary and critical discourses in Canada. *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* asserts that, “CanLit has been subject to a relentless process of institutionalization” (vii). In response, editors Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki seek to address the changing relationship between literature and the nation-state “head-on.” *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies* extends this project through its attention to the rearticulation of the relationship of literature and the state, its reconsideration of “what constitutes the proper object(s) of literary studies” (xi), and its interest in the practice and theorization of collaboration. One institutional truism in the Humanities has been the reification of the single-authored monograph. That both collections have been the collaborative effort of two editors and a host of contributors is noteworthy insofar as it enacts a version of the methodological change the writers invoke.

Drawing on Raymond Williams’s assertion that “culture is ordinary,” Kamboureli and Zacharias note that the contributors to *Shifting* “do not set aside the literary so much as they work to broaden the definition of the literary itself” (xi). The result is a wideranging but uniformly socially- and politically-engaged collection. Individual essays address: the effects of neoliberalism on national literatures (Derksen); the transnational traffic of “Can.Lit(e)” (Fuller); white settlement and biopolitics (Brodie); the memorialization of Vimy (Zacharias); reasonable accommodation in the Bouchard-Taylor hearings (Kin Gagnon and Jiwani); community articulations (Lai); the archive politics of small presses (Mezei); the risks and rewards of cultural translation (Fujimoto); the performance of white civility in the “Age of Apology” (Coleman); First Nations Jurisprudence and *sui generis* solidarity (Findlay); and the subversive politics of Indigenous acts of inscription (kulchyski). This is no motley crew of disparate and tangentially literary texts. Rather, Kamboureli, Zacharias, and the authors have constructed a collection that opens the possibilities for literary and critical discourse in the Canadian context.

In short, the collection is crucial reading. Kamboureli’s introduction plots cultural, historical, and political evolutions in the disciplinary field. Beginning with a summary of some of the key critical texts of the decade (Cavell, Wakeham, Emberley, and Cho), Kamboureli cogently surveys the changing objects of literary study in the Canadian context. Perhaps anticipating critical dissent, she offers a useful iteration of the critical qualities of literariness. Drawing on the work of Roman Jakobson, Terry Eagleton, Victor Shklovsky, and Paul de Man, she reminds us that literariness is much more

than “pure aesthetic and rhetorical elements.” She goes on to argue that an understanding of literariness as a product of the “the triangulation of culture, literature, and the nation-state” (1) allows critics to reposition themselves so as to be better able to critique the present and produce alternative ways of knowing that may shift the future.

Shifting the Ground thus models a version of the epistemological and methodological changes it charts. Through its collaborative editing process, its rhizomatic collection of essays, and its reframing of the object of literary study, this collection repositions the literary critic as a relevant, and indeed crucial figure in the ever-evolving relationship between cultural production, the nation-state, and the world.

ERIN WUNKER
DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY