

String Theory Methods for Condensed Matter Physics

The discovery of a duality between Anti-de Sitter spaces (AdS) and Conformal Field Theories (CFT) has led to major advances in our understanding of quantum field theory and quantum gravity. String theory methods and AdS/CFT correspondence maps provide new ways to think about difficult condensed matter problems. String theory methods based on the AdS/CFT correspondence allow us to transform problems so they have weak interactions and can be solved more easily. They can also help map problems to different descriptions, for instance, mapping the description of a fluid using the Navier-Stokes equations to the description of an event horizon of a black hole using Einstein's equations. This textbook covers the applications of string theory methods and the mathematics of AdS/CFT to areas of condensed matter physics. Bridging the gap between string theory and condensed matter, this is a valuable textbook for students and researchers in both fields.

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**To the memory of my mother,
who inspired me to become a physicist**

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page xvii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xviii
<i>Introduction</i>	xix
Part I Condensed Matter Models and Problems	1
1 Lightning Review of Statistical Mechanics, Thermodynamics, Phases, and Phase Transitions	3
1.1 Note on Conventions	3
1.2 Thermodynamics	3
1.3 Phase Transitions	7
1.4 Statistical Mechanics and Ensembles	8
1.5 Distributions	12
Exercises	14
2 Magnetism in Solids	16
2.1 Types of Magnetism: Diamagnetism, Paramagnetism, (Anti)Ferromagnetism, Ferrimagnetism	16
2.2 Langevin Diamagnetism	19
2.3 Paramagnetism of Bound Electrons (Langevin-Brillouin)	20
2.4 Pauli Paramagnetism	21
2.5 Van Vleck Paramagnetism	22
2.6 Ferromagnetism	23
2.7 Ferrimagnetism and Antiferromagnetism	25
Exercises	27
3 Electrons in Solids: Fermi Gas vs. Fermi Liquid	28
3.1 Free Fermi Gas	28
3.2 Fermi Surfaces	33
3.3 Fermi Liquid	38
Exercises	39
4 Bosonic Quasi-Particles: Phonons and Plasmons	42
4.1 Phonons in 1+1 and 3+1 Dimensions	42
4.2 Optical and Acoustic Branches; Diatomic Lattices	45
4.3 Electron-Phonon Interaction	46

4.4	Plasmons	48
4.5	Thomas-Fermi Screening	49
	Exercises	51
5	Spin-Charge Separation in 1+1-Dimensional Solids: Spinons and Holons	52
5.1	One-Dimensional (Fermionic) Hubbard Model and the Luttinger Liquid	52
5.2	Bosonization	54
5.3	Spin-Charge Separation: Spinons and Holons	58
5.4	Sine-Gordon vs. Massive Thirring Model Duality	59
	Exercises	61
6	The Ising Model and the Heisenberg Spin Chain	62
6.1	The Ising Model in 1+1 and 2+1 Dimensions	62
6.2	Mean Field Approximation	65
6.3	Kramers-Wannier Duality at $H = 0$	67
6.4	The Heisenberg Model and Coordinate Bethe Ansatz	68
	Exercises	73
7	Spin Chains and Integrable Systems	75
7.1	Classical Integrable Systems	75
7.2	Quantum Mechanical Integrable Systems in 1+1 Dimensions	76
7.3	Algebraic and Coordinate Bethe Ansatz	78
7.4	Generalizations	81
	Exercises	83
8	The Thermodynamic Bethe Ansatz	84
8.1	Massive Relativistic 1+1-Dimensional Integrable Systems and Bethe Ansatz Equations	84
8.2	Thermodynamic Limit	86
8.3	Thermodynamics and TBA Equations	87
	Exercises	89
9	Conformal Field Theories and Quantum Phase Transitions	91
9.1	Thermal Phase Transitions and Conformal Field Theory	91
9.2	Conformal Field Theory in Two and d Dimensions	93
9.3	Quantum Conformal Field Theory	94
9.4	Quantum Phase Transitions	97
9.5	Insulator-Superconducting Phase Transition	99
	Exercises	102
10	Classical vs. Quantum Hall Effect	104
10.1	Classical Hall Effect	104
10.2	Hall Effect Experimental Results	105
10.3	Integer Quantum Hall Effect	106

10.4	Edge Currents and Laughlin's Gauge Principle	109
10.5	The Fractional Quantum Hall Effect	112
	Exercises	115
11	Superconductivity: Landau-Ginzburg, London, and BCS	117
11.1	Superconductivity Properties	117
11.2	Landau's Theory of Second Order Phase Transitions	119
11.3	Thermodynamics of the Superconducting Phase Transition	122
11.4	Landau-Ginzburg Theory and Gross-Pitaevskii Equation	124
11.5	Electrodynamics of the Superconductor: London Equation	127
11.6	BCS Theory	129
11.7	Vortices in Type II Superconductors	133
11.8	Josephson Junctions	134
11.9	High T_c Superconductors	137
	Exercises	140
12	Topology and Statistics: Berry and Chern-Simons, Anyons, and Nonabelions	141
12.1	Berry Phase and Connection	141
12.2	Effective Chern-Simons Theories in Solids	143
12.3	Anyons and Fractional Statistics	145
12.4	Nonabelian Anyons (Nonabelions) and Statistics	148
12.5	Topological Superconductors	150
	Exercises	153
13	Insulators	154
13.1	Fermionic Hubbard Model and Metal-Insulator Transition	155
13.2	Defects and Anderson Localization	158
13.3	Mott Insulators	160
13.4	Topological Insulators	161
	Exercises	166
14	The Kondo Effect and the Kondo Problem	167
14.1	The Kondo Hamiltonian and Impurity-Conduction Spin Interaction	167
14.2	Electron-Impurity Scattering and Resistivity Minimum; Kondo Temperature	169
14.3	Strong Coupling and the Kondo Problem	173
14.4	Heavy Fermions and the Kondo Lattice	175
	Exercises	177
15	Hydrodynamics and Transport Properties: From Boltzmann to Navier-Stokes	178
15.1	Boltzmann Equations	178
15.2	Applications of the Boltzmann Equation	179
15.3	Nonviscous Hydrodynamics	181
15.4	Viscous Hydrodynamics and Navier-Stokes	183

15.5 Relativistic Generalization	184
Exercises	187
Part II Elements of General Relativity and String Theory	
16 The Einstein Equation and the Schwarzschild Solution	191
16.1 Special Relativity	191
16.2 The Geometry of General Relativity	191
16.3 Einstein's Theory: Definition	194
16.4 Kinematics of Gravity	195
16.5 Dynamics of Gravity: The Einstein Equation	197
16.6 The Newtonian Limit	199
16.7 The Schwarzschild Solution	200
Exercises	202
17 The Reissner-Nordstrom and Kerr-Newman Solutions and Thermodynamic Properties of Black Holes	204
17.1 The Reissner-Nordstrom Solution: Solution with Electric Charge	204
17.2 Horizons, BPS Bound, and Extremality	205
17.3 General Stationary Black Hole: The Kerr-Newman Solution	207
17.4 Quantum Field Theory at Finite Temperature and Hawking Radiation	208
17.5 The Four Laws of Black Hole Thermodynamics	211
Exercises	215
18 Extra Dimensions and Kaluza-Klein	216
18.1 Kaluza-Klein Theory	216
18.2 The Kaluza-Klein Metrics	217
18.3 Fields with Spin	220
18.4 The Original Kaluza-Klein Theory	222
Exercises	225
19 Electromagnetism and Gravity in Various Dimensions, Consistent Truncations	226
19.1 Electromagnetism in Higher Dimensions	226
19.2 Gravity in Higher Dimensions	227
19.3 Spheres in Higher Dimensions	227
19.4 The Electric Field of a Point Charge in Higher Dimensions	228
19.5 The Gravitational Field of a Point Mass in Higher Dimensions	229
19.6 Consistent Truncations	232
Exercises	235
20 Gravity Plus Matter: Black Holes and p-Branes in Various Dimensions	236
20.1 Schwarzschild Solution in Higher Dimensions	236
20.2 Reissner-Nordstrom Solution in Higher Dimensions	237
20.3 P -Branes	240

20.4 <i>P</i> -Brane Solutions	242
Exercises	245
21 Weak/Strong Coupling Dualities in 1+1, 2+1, 3+1, and $d+1$ Dimensions	247
21.1 1+1 Dimensions: T-Duality in the Path Integral	248
21.2 2+1 Dimensions: Particle-Vortex Duality	250
21.3 3+1 Dimensions: Maxwell Duality	251
21.4 $d+1$ Dimensions: Poincaré Duality	252
Exercises	254
22 The Relativistic Point Particle and the Relativistic String	256
22.1 The Relativistic Point Particle	256
22.2 First Order Action for the Point Particle	258
22.3 Relativistic Strings	260
22.4 First Order Action for the Relativistic String	262
22.5 Gauge Fixing and Constraints	265
Exercises	267
23 Lightcone Strings and Quantization	269
23.1 Conformal Invariance	269
23.2 Light-Cone Gauge and Mode Expansions	270
23.3 Constraints and Hamiltonian	272
23.4 Quantization of the String	274
23.5 Light-Cone Gauge Quantization	276
23.6 String Spectrum	278
Exercises	280
24 D-Branes and Gauge Fields	282
24.1 D-Branes	282
24.2 The D-Brane Action: DBI	283
24.3 The WZ Term	288
24.4 Quantization of Open Strings on Dp -Branes	289
Exercises	293
25 Electromagnetic Fields on D-Branes: Supersymmetry and $\mathcal{N} = 4$ SYM, T-Duality of Closed Strings	295
25.1 Low-Energy D-Brane Action	295
25.2 Supersymmetry	296
25.3 $\mathcal{N} = 4$ Super Yang-Mills in 3+1 Dimensions	297
25.4 Nonlinear Born-Infeld Action	298
25.5 Closed Strings on Compact Spaces	300
25.6 T-Duality of the Spectrum and of the Background	302
Exercises	305

26 Dualities and M Theory	306
26.1 T-Duality of Open Strings	306
26.2 T-Duality and Chan-Paton Factors	307
26.3 Supergravity Actions	309
26.4 S-Duality of Type IIB Theory	311
26.5 M-Theory	313
26.6 The String Duality Web	315
Exercises	317
27 The AdS/CFT Correspondence: Definition and Motivation	319
27.1 Conformal Invariance and Conformal Field Theories in $D > 2$ Dimensions	319
27.2 AdS Space	320
27.3 AdS/CFT Motivation	324
27.4 AdS/CFT Definition and Limits	327
27.5 State Map	328
27.6 Witten (or GKPW) Construction	329
27.7 Generalizations	330
Exercises	332
Part III Applying String Theory to Condensed Matter Problems	335
28 The pp Wave Correspondence: String Hamiltonian from $\mathcal{N} = 4$ SYM	337
28.1 PP Waves	337
28.2 The Penrose Limit in Gravity	339
28.3 The Penrose Limit of AdS/CFT	341
28.4 The String Hamiltonian on the pp Wave	342
28.5 Bosonic SYM Operators for String Theory Modes	344
28.6 Discretized String Action from $\mathcal{N} = 4$ SYM	346
Exercises	349
29 Spin Chains from $\mathcal{N} = 4$ SYM	351
29.1 Cuntz Oscillators, Eigenstates, and Eigenenergies from the pp Wave	351
29.2 The $SO(6)$ Spin Chain from $\mathcal{N} = 4$ SYM	353
29.3 The $SU(2)$ Sector and the Dilatation Operator	355
29.4 Bethe Ansatz Results	357
Exercises	359
30 The Bethe Ansatz: Bethe Strings from Classical Strings in AdS	361
30.1 Thermodynamic Limit of the Bethe Ansatz for the $SU(2)$ Sector	361
30.2 Bethe Strings and their Equations	362
30.3 Long Strings in AdS	363
30.4 Classical String Equations and Bethe String Limit	366
30.5 Massive Relativistic Systems from AdS Space and the TBA?	369
Exercises	371

31 Integrability and AdS/CFT	373
31.1 Hints of Integrability	373
31.2 Integrability and the Yangian	374
31.3 Quantum Integrability for Spin Chains	375
31.4 Classical Integrability for Strings in AdS Space	377
31.5 Higher Loops in $\mathcal{N} = 4$ SYM and All-Loop Bethe Ansatz	378
Exercises	381
32 AdS/CFT Phenomenology: Lifshitz, Galilean, and Schrödinger Symmetries and their Gravity Duals	383
32.1 Lifshitz Symmetry and its Phenomenological Gravity Dual	383
32.2 Galilean and Schrödinger Symmetries and their Phenomenological Gravity Duals	385
32.3 String Theory Embeddings of Schrödinger Symmetry	387
Exercises	389
33 Finite Temperature and Black Holes	391
33.1 Finite Temperature and Hawking Radiation	391
33.2 Fermions and Spin Structures in Black Holes and Supersymmetry Breaking	392
33.3 Witten Prescription for Finite Temperature in AdS/CFT	394
33.4 The Witten Metric	397
Exercises	400
34 Hot Plasma Equilibrium Thermodynamics: Entropy, Charge Density, and Chemical Potential of Strongly Coupled Theories	402
34.1 $\mathcal{N} = 4$ SYM Plasma from AdS/CFT: Entropy, Energy Density, Pressure	402
34.2 Adding Chemical Potential and Charge Density	405
34.3 Phenomenological Plasma Models	407
34.4 Speed of Sound	410
Exercises	412
35 Spectral Functions and Transport Properties	413
35.1 Retarded Green's Functions and Susceptibilities	413
35.2 Spectral Functions	415
35.3 Kubo Formulas	417
35.4 AdS/CFT in Minkowski Space at Finite Temperature	419
35.5 Other Transport Properties	421
Exercises	423
36 Dynamic and Nonequilibrium Properties of Plasmas: Electric Transport, Langevin Diffusion, and Thermalization via Black Hole Quasi-Normal Modes	424
36.1 Electric Charge Transport in the Plasma and the Membrane Paradigm	424
36.2 Momentum Broadening, Langevin Diffusion, and its Gravity Dual	429

36.3 Thermalization from Quasi-Normal Modes of the Dual Black Hole	434
Exercises	437
37 The Holographic Superconductor	438
37.1 Holographic Superconductor Ingredients	438
37.2 Superconducting Black Holes	440
37.3 Transport and Mass Gap	443
37.4 Breitenlohner-Freedman Bound and Superconductor	445
37.5 Holographic Josephson Junctions	446
Exercises	452
38 The Fluid-Gravity Correspondence: Conformal Relativistic Fluids from Black Hole Horizons	453
38.1 Relativistic Fluids	453
38.2 Conformal Fluids	455
38.3 Fluid Equations from Black Holes	457
38.4 Viscosity over Entropy Density from Black Holes	458
38.5 Membrane Paradigm: Relativistic Fluid Equations from Black Hole Horizons	460
Exercises	465
39 Nonrelativistic Fluids: From Einstein to Navier-Stokes and Back	466
39.1 The Navier-Stokes Scaling Limit	466
39.2 Relativistic Hydrodynamics and Bjorken Flow	468
39.3 Boost-Invariant Conformal Flows from Black Hole Horizon	472
39.4 Einstein's Equations Solutions from Solutions of Navier-Stokes Equation	473
Exercises	475
Part IV Advanced Applications	477
40 Fermi Gas and Liquid in AdS/CFT	479
40.1 Gravity Dual for Fermi Gas	479
40.2 Fermi Liquid Construction for Gravity Dual	483
40.3 "Electron Star" Gravity Dual, Its "Neutron Star" Origin, and Interpolation	486
Exercises	492
41 Quantum Hall Effect from String Theory	493
41.1 Quantum Hall Effect and Chern-Simons Theory in String Theory	493
41.2 Quantum Hall Effect and Chern-Simons Models from Holography	499
Exercises	506
42 Quantum Critical Systems and AdS/CFT	507
42.1 The ABJM Model and its Vacuum	507

42.2 Gravity Dual of the ABJM Model	510
42.3 Models for Quantum Critical Systems	511
42.4 Abelian Reduction of the ABJM Model to Landau-Ginzburg	512
42.5 Abelian Reduction to Landau-Ginzburg in Condensed Matter Systems?	514
42.6 Nonrelativistic Limit of Duality and the Jackiw-Pi Model	516
Exercises	521
43 Particle-Vortex Duality and ABJM vs. $AdS_4 \times CP^3$ Duality	522
43.1 Particle-Vortex Dualities in the Path Integral	522
43.2 Particle-Vortex Duality Constraints on Condensed Matter Transport	525
43.3 Particle-Vortex Duality Embedded in the ABJM Model	528
43.4 Particle-Vortex Duality as Maxwell Duality in AdS_4	529
43.5 Nonrelativistic Limit and Duality with Jackiw-Pi Vortex	531
Exercises	533
44 Topology and Nonstandard Statistics from AdS/CFT	535
44.1 Berry Phase from AdS/CFT	535
44.2 Anyons in AdS/CFT	537
44.3 Nonabelian Statistics in AdS/CFT	540
Exercises	541
45 DBI Scalar Model for QGP/Black Hole Hydro- and Thermo-Dynamics	542
45.1 The Heisenberg Model and Quark-Gluon Plasma	542
45.2 DBI Scalar Model for Black Hole	544
45.3 Generalizations of the Heisenberg Model	548
45.4 Gravity Duals and the Heisenberg Model	549
45.5 QGP Hydrodynamics from DBI Scalar	551
Exercises	555
46 Holographic Entanglement Entropy in Condensed Matter	556
46.1 Entanglement Entropy in Quantum Field Theory	556
46.2 The Ryu-Takayanagi Prescription	558
46.3 Holographic Entanglement Entropy in Two Dimensions	559
46.4 Condensed Matter Applications	560
Exercises	563
47 Holographic Insulators	565
47.1 Momentum Dissipation through Random Disorder: Anderson-Type Insulator?	565
47.2 Momentum Dissipation through Holographic Lattice: Hubbard-Type Insulator?	569
47.3 Effective Massive Gravity Model for Lattice	571
47.4 Strong Momentum Dissipation in the IR: New Holographic Insulators and Mott-Type Insulators	575

47.5 Hydrodynamic Flow, Dirac Fluid, and Linear Resistivity	577
Exercises	580
48 Holographic Strange Metals and the Kondo Problem	582
48.1 Hyperscaling Violation and Holography	582
48.2 Holographic Strange Metal Constructions	585
48.3 Supersymmetric Kondo Effect via Holography	589
48.4 Toward the Real Kondo Problem	592
Exercises	594
<i>References</i>	595
<i>Index</i>	603

Preface

Over the past 20 years, string theory has started to branch out and has tried to tackle difficult problems in several areas, mostly through the advent of the AdS/CFT correspondence. While at the beginning the sought-for applications were mostly in particle physics and cosmology, over the last 15 years or so we have seen a gradual increase in the number of applications to condensed matter theory, to the point that now various string theorists work completely in condensed matter. The purpose of this book is to provide an introduction to the various methods that have been developed in string theory for condensed matter applications, and to be accessible to graduate students just beginning to learn about either string theory or condensed matter theory, with the aim of leading them to where they can start research in the field. I assume a solid working knowledge of Quantum Field Theory, as can be obtained from a two-semester graduate course, and an advanced undergraduate course on Solid State physics, as well as some basic elements of General Relativity (but not necessarily a full course). Familiarity with string theory or modern condensed matter theory is helpful, but not necessary, since I try to be as self-consistent as possible. To that end, in Part I, I give an introduction to modern topics in condensed matter from the perspective of a string theorist. In Part II, I give a very basic introduction to general relativity and string theory, mostly for the benefit of people who haven't seen them before, as they are not very detailed. Parts III and IV then describe the string theory applications to the condensed matter problems of Part I. The goal is to give an introduction to the various tools available, but I will not try to be extensive in my treatment of any of them. Instead, my aim is to have a fair overview of all the methods currently available in the field. Part III describes tools that are by now standard: the pp wave correspondence, spin chains and integrability, AdS/CFT phenomenology ("AdS/CMT"), and the fluid-gravity correspondence. Part IV focuses on more advanced topics that are still being developed, like Fermi liquids and non-Fermi liquids, insulators, the quantum Hall effect, nonstandard statistics, etc.

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This book is an expanded version of a course I gave at the IFT in São Paulo, so I would like to thank all the students who participated in the course for their input that helped shape the material.

I have to thank of course all my collaborators with whom I developed my research which led to my being able to write this book. I have also to thank my students and postdocs for their patience in dealing with my reduced time to work with them. A special thanks to my Ph.D. student Heliudson de Oliveira Bernardo, who helped me get rid of typos and errors in equations by carefully checking a previous version of the book. To my editor at Cambridge University Press, Simon Capelin, thank you for believing in me and helping me to get the book published, and to all the staff at CUP for making sure the book is up to standard.

Introduction

Before learning about string theory methods for condensed matter physics, we must define the problems we want to tackle and what string theory is. The interesting and difficult problems in condensed matter theory are in general strong coupling ones, though not always. In the first part of the book we will therefore learn about a variety of problems of topical interest, like Fermi liquids, spin chains, integrable systems, conformal field theories, quantum phase transitions, superconductivity, the quantum Hall effect, the Kondo problem, and hydrodynamics.

We then need to define string theory and its main low-energy tool, general relativity. After defining general relativity, we will focus on the objects of most interest, black holes and their extensions, that will be used extensively in the book. String theory is then defined, mostly as a perturbative theory of strings, a field theory on the 2-dimensional “worldsheets” spanned by the string. But we will also learn that there are various nonperturbative “dualities,” where one description is mapped to another, in terms of other variables and valid in other regions of parameter space. We will also learn about the most important tool available for condensed matter applications, the AdS/CFT correspondence.

The AdS/CFT correspondence relates string theory, usually in its low-energy version of *supergravity*, a supersymmetric theory of gravity, and living in a curved background spacetime, to field theory in a flat spacetime of lower dimensionality. The correspondence is *holographic*, which means that in some sense, the physics in the higher dimension is projected onto a flat surface without losing information, at the price of encoding the information nonlocally.

The original incarnation of the AdS/CFT correspondence defined by Juan Maldacena related a certain field theory, 4-dimensional “ $\mathcal{N} = 4$ SYM,” to string theory in a curved background, $AdS_5 \times S^5$. In that case, although Maldacena’s presentation emphasized it is a conjecture, the overwhelming number of checks that were performed since then makes it a pedantic point to still call it a conjecture; to all intents and purposes it is proven. Similar comments apply to the first (to my knowledge) application to condensed matter, the “pp wave correspondence” and the generalization to spin chains, started by the work of Berenstein, Maldacena, and myself, as an off-shoot of the original correspondence.

However, more common applications to condensed matter usually are of two types: “top-down” constructions, where one starts with a duality defined in string theory, with fewer checks than in the original case, but nevertheless defined beyond the level of conjecture. In that case, however, it is usually less clear why the field theory can be applied to the condensed matter problem of interest. Or “bottom-up” constructions, where one starts with a field theory we would like to describe, for condensed matter reasons, but then one guesses a possible holographic dual gravitational (string) theory, in which case the duality

itself is less than clear. The point of view most commonly stated is that either way, one finds nice gravitational ways to parametrize the condensed matter problem, which makes it less important whether we can actually rigorously prove that the gravitational description is rigorously equivalent to the condensed matter problem.

There are other cases as well. Sometimes it is possible to view the condensed problem in a different way by simply embedding it into string theory. This is the case of Fermi gas constructions, particle-vortex duality, and Chern-Simons and Quantum Hall Effect constructions pre-dating holographic models. Yet in other cases like the fluid/gravity correspondence, which includes a mapping of the Navier-Stokes equations of viscous fluid hydrodynamics to the Einstein equations near the event horizon of a black hole, there are ways to argue for the map, but it is not clear that the new description is better than the original one, just different.

There are a number of reviews on various string theory applications to condensed matter, but they each mostly focus on one particular aspect and assume a lot of background. These include [1], [2], [3], and [4]. The book [5] presents many, but not all, of the applications described here and spends less time on the background material needed to understand it.