

2020

## World, Worlds, Worlding: A Review of Pheng Cheah's What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature

Chris Hall  
*University of Kansas*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/beyondthemarginsjournal>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hall, Chris (2020) "World, Worlds, Worlding: A Review of Pheng Cheah's What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature," *Beyond the Margins: A Journal of Graduate Literary Scholarship*: Vol. 1 , Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46428/btm.1.7>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/beyondthemarginsjournal/vol1/iss1/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Beyond the Margins: A Journal of Graduate Literary Scholarship* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

# World, Worlds, Worlding: A Review of Pheng Cheah's *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*

Chris Hall

Cheah, Pheng. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Duke UP, 2016. Cloth \$104.95, Paper \$28.95. 397 pages. ISBN 9780822360926 (pb).

Pheng Cheah's *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* confronts the question posed in his title through readings in the western philosophical tradition and postcolonial literature. By analyzing postcolonial works such as Ninotchka Rosca's *State of War* and Timothy Mo's *Renegade* through postcolonial theory and western philosophy, Cheah recasts the function and political processes of world literature. He contends in this text that much of the current scholarship on world literature and cosmopolitanism is based upon notions that ultimately limit the world by understanding it solely in spatial terms (3). As a counter to this, he suggests that literary criticism should become much more open-ended and politically cognizant by rethinking what exactly the world is; while what constitutes "the world" is of course essential to scholarship of world literature, the term itself has been thoroughly undertheorized (3).

To ground his revised approach to world literature, Cheah recenters the discipline around a concept of *worlds* in terms of their temporality and normativity. He argues that "the conceptualization of the world in temporal terms provides a normative basis for transforming the world made by capitalist globalization," and that "this normative understanding of the world leads to a radical rethinking of world literature as literature that is an active power in the making of worlds" (2). This sense of activity convincingly opens the way for a process that Cheah describes as "worlding," which "refers to how a world is held together and given unity by the force of time" (8). The world emerges here as something plural and malleable that can also serve oppressive ends. Cheah's reframing of the world also involves unpacking the notion of "unworlding," or reductions of and restrictions placed upon what the world is and can be (9). With this tangible and fully realized framework in hand, Cheah explores postcolonial novels from Jamaica, India, Somalia, and the Philippines, demonstrating their capacity for "literary reworlding" by building upon a deconstructed, undecided notion of a world changeable by literature that puts forth alternative temporal possibilities (214). Such a "reworlding" offers welcome prospects for reconfiguring the world's unity and rethinking cultural and political relationships on a global scale.

The Introduction firmly grounds Cheah's urgent and essential interventions in current world literature scholarship. Early on he rejects "facile cosmopolitanism devoid of normative

force” and puts forward “a more rigorous way of understanding world literature’s normativity as a modality of cosmopolitanism that responds to the need to remake the world as a place that is *open* to the emergence of peoples that globalization deprives of world” (19). In Parts I and II of the text, Cheah presents a thorough and indispensable genealogy of “world” as a western philosophical concept. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for this, covering familiar topics such as *Weltliteratur* as discussed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe<sup>1</sup> and Erich Auerbach.<sup>2</sup> This analysis draws out the qualities of normativity and temporality within *Weltliteratur*; in doing so, the analysis links *Weltliteratur* with more recent theorizations of world literature, such as those by David Damrosch<sup>3</sup> and Franco Moretti.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Cheah positions his argument to great effect by interrogating the ways in which such theories can become complicit with globalization, as well as how they lack a sufficient appreciation of literature’s power to envision political difference. He argues in the text that “world literature can only be a very weak causal force in the world unless its normative dimension is broached” (37). Cheah conducts his argument skillfully, and with a strong push for societal and disciplinary change. The primacy of normativity, however, is not quite as convincing as might be hoped, as the concept still appears vulnerable to the critique that *any* normative dimension threatens to ultimately prove limiting. The rest of Part I consists of Chapter 2, “The World According to Hegel,” and Chapter 3, which focuses on Karl Marx<sup>5</sup> in order to contribute a materialist dimension to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s “spiritualist account of the world” and its history (46).<sup>6</sup> These chapters offer a much-needed link between world literature’s foundational works and key philosophical accounts of societal and individual relationships to the world.

Part II brings Cheah’s philosophical discussion into the twentieth century and further expounds upon the interplay between worlds, worlding, and unworlding. This portion of the book features successive chapters on worlds and worlding in the works of Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Derrida. Each of these chapters offers a compelling and nuanced discussion of the theorist in question while remaining focused around Cheah’s key terms. This section constitutes Cheah’s strongest theoretical push by outlining a trajectory of the notion of “world” that becomes politically and disciplinarily imperative, particularly when it culminates in Derrida’s writing on time and the other.<sup>7</sup> In Derrida’s terms, literature “opens a world and is the immanent principle of the world’s transformability because it points to an alterity that cannot be appropriated by the subject” (185). This conceptualization is undergirded by the understanding of Heideggerean world and unworlding<sup>8</sup> in Chapter 4 and the political project of Arendtian natality as worlding<sup>9</sup> in Chapter 5. Taken as a whole, Part II presents a path forward for literary engagement in the world, one by which scholars are urged to take account of the different openings that world literature has to offer, and how these can be explored in the pursuit of disciplinary and political change.

In Part III, “Of Other Worlds to Come,” Cheah makes a slightly abrupt turn from philosophy to postcolonial literature. Chapter 7 situates this transition through a treatment of decolonization theory as it relates to the alternative temporalities of worlding. However, this treatment is somewhat truncated in comparison with the impressively nuanced explications of European philosophy that precede it. The subsequent chapters and Epilogue rectify much of this by undertaking powerful analyses of postcolonial novels. These analyses help to evidence the promising possibilities of the relationship between decolonization and worlding. Chapter 8

shrewdly assesses the tension between the unworlding of colonial oppression and the possible futures of a memory that eludes oppression in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*. In Chapter 9, Cheah examines Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, effectively situating it within the framework that he has developed throughout *What Is a World?: "The Hungry Tide* is world literature in its most robust normative meaning because it seeks to reworld the world of the subaltern inhabitants of the Sundarban islands" (246-47). These readings make a strong case for the worlding possibilities of world literature understood in Cheah's terms, a literature capable of taking apart and remaking the limitations placed on world populations and spaces by the processes of globalization.

The final chapter and the Epilogue cover Nuruddin Farah's *Gifts*, and works by Ninotchka Rosca and Timothy Mo, respectively. This closing portion of the book is Cheah's most sustained engagement with postcolonial literature, submitting trenchant critiques of tourism, environmentalism, and humanitarian aid in decolonizing countries. Cheah's vibrant and politically generative readings of these texts highlight the absence of such work in the first two parts of the book, leaving the reader to wonder what a more thoroughly integrated examination of world theories alongside postcolonial literature might have produced. The relatively brief treatment of postcolonial theory in Part III also points to a great deal of further pressing work to be done interrogating theories of the world from the west through postcolonial thought. Highly pertinent to this would be critiques offered by theorists such as Gayatri Spivak,<sup>10</sup> Frantz Fanon,<sup>11</sup> and Edward Said.<sup>12</sup> While these critics are touched on by Cheah, they are overshadowed by his focus on western theorists. Where the work of postcolonial authors and critics slips from view in favor of detailing the western tradition, the absence is noticeable, particularly in a text whose title emphasizes its postcolonial approach. While Cheah denies any potential "division of labor between European philosophy and literature from the postcolonial South" in his Introduction, the book's reliance on European thought sometimes downplays the fact that postcolonial literature and philosophy have generated many of their own rigorous conceptualizations of the world (14).

Notwithstanding these disciplinary and regional divisions in the text, Cheah's book is an essential contribution to both current political philosophy and literary studies. Scholars of postcolonialism and world literature especially will find here an explosive and challenging new methodology that brings a political energy and urgency to these fields at the disciplinary level. This methodology is well-equipped to resist teleological resolution and globalization's penchant for exploitation and limitation, both economic and disciplinary.

**Chris Hall**  
**University of Kansas**

## Notes

1. Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von and Johann Peter Eckerman. *Conversations with Eckermann, 1823-1832*, Northpoint Press, 1984.
2. Auerbach, Erich. "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," *Centennial Review*, 1969, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 1-17.
3. Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature?*, Princeton UP, 2003.
4. See Moretti, Franco. "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1, 2000, pp. 54-68.
5. See especially Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Penguin Classics, 1973.
6. Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind. Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. 1830. Clarendon Press, 1971.
7. Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time—I. Counterfeit Money*, U of Chicago P, 1992.
8. Heidegger, Martin. "The Age of the World Picture." *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 57-72.
9. See especially Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, U of Chicago P, 1958.
10. Spivak, Gayatri. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, 1985, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 243-61.
11. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 2008.
12. Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Chatto and Windus, 1993.