

## Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

---

Volume 41

Issue 2 *Writing 1914-1918: National Responses to the  
Great War*

Article 23

---


6-15-2017

Pheng Cheah. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.

Gregory R. Jackson

*Utah Valley University*, [gjackson@uvu.edu](mailto:gjackson@uvu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>

 Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [German Literature Commons](#), [Latin American Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Spanish Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Jackson, Gregory R. (2017) "Pheng Cheah. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 41: Iss. 2, Article 23. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1949>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

---

Pheng Cheah. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.

**Abstract**

Review of Pheng Cheah. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.

**Keywords**

Postcolonial, world literature

Pheng Cheah. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016. 408 pp.

“World literature” has proven a problematic term at least since the start of the twenty-first century. Rejecting the previous definition of (mostly Western) canonized works, scholars have debated just what the term does or should mean. Does it encompass literature read beyond its country of origin, those translated into a foreign language, or those that have a “global” topic? Is it something else entirely? This is the debate to which Pheng Cheah’s *What is a World?* contributes. His is a theory-driven postmodern argument calling for postcolonial literature to be considered world literature.

Cheah supports his argument by positioning himself as a connecting point between the Greek-originating idea of cosmopolitanism and traditional concepts of world literature. He believes the “reason for the missed encounter between world literature and cosmopolitanism is that neither field of study has carefully examined the key concept common to them, *the world*” (3). By “world,” Cheah means one of many worlds. For him, our normalized idea of the world is a capitalist and colonial construction, built and maintained by temporal structures (i.e. time zones). He explains that “worlding (*welten*) . . . refers to how a world is held together and given unity by the force of time. In giving rise to existence, temporalization worlds a world” (8). Cheah argues then that our concept of time is driven by capitalist thinking spread via European colonialism and postcolonial literature is worlding new (postcolonial) worlds. Cheah is not speaking figuratively either; his interest is in how postcolonial literature plays a creating role, not just a reactive one, enabling it to offer us entirely new worlds in a literal sense. This of course brings us full circle to the key concept he contends links cosmopolitanism and world literature: *the world*.

The book is organized in three parts, the first two of which lay the theoretical framework. Part I draws from multiple theorists, but most especially from the ideas of Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx. Hegel’s views on cosmopolitanism help form the basis for discussing worlding while Marx’s idea of a teleological history marching towards the proletarian revolution proves an apt basis for discussing the role of time in worlding. To put that in Cheah’s own words, “Marx locates the temporal force of world-making in the human ability to approximate time” (90). In part II, Cheah looks more to Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Ardan, and Jacques Derrida, all of whom critique the spatial aspects of worldliness. Heidegger contends that “the world cannot be an object of human creation” (100). Alternatively, as Cheah so succinctly summarized it in his introduction, “for Heidegger, the world is precisely what cannot be represented on a map” (8). Ardan and Derrida critique Heidegger while building upon his theoretical foundations. Cheah’s use of Derrida is too extensive to summarize completely, but highlights

include his examination of how Derrida's ideas relate to worlding in terms of time, literature, and "the world as text" (167).

Part III is where Cheah dives into specific postcolonial literary works to show us the "other worlds to come" (189). Specifically, Cheah references literature from "the postcolonial south" and he truly circumnavigates the southern half of the globe (194). He analyzes Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, which is a "text of ecocriticism" taking place in India (254). He also examines Ninotchka Rosca's *State of War* about dictatorial rule in the Philippines, and many other works by authors hailing from the Caribbean, Africa, and Southern Asia. Readers of this journal will likely find Cheah's analysis of Frantz Fanon of the greatest interest. To borrow Cheah's language, Fanon worlds another world through "the retelling of precolonial histories that contests the version found in official colonial archives," and by staving off cultural genocide through a "revival of traditional culture and customs" (197). Touching on his theme of a capitalist world challenged by postcolonial literature's new worlds, Cheah further explains that "Fanon has denounced the establishment of a tourist economy in the Third World by the neocolonial indigenous bourgeoisie" (223). If the thorough manner in which Cheah has examined Fanon is an accurate measurement for his treatment of all authors, readers familiar with any of the works analyzed here will be very pleased.

Cheah has made it easy for the reader to trace his intellectual footsteps. Endnotes and a selected yet nonetheless robust bibliography enable us to see how Cheah came to his conclusions. The index gives researchers ready access to Cheah's views on specific theories, theorists, authors, and ideas.

While scholars of postcolonial and world literature will find *What Is a World?* of great value, it may prove a difficult read for students. Cheah vents his own frustration with the lack of interest in the literature examined in this book among his graduate students at Berkeley, stating that he met "resistance directly when [he] taught a graduate seminar on postcolonial literature" in 2009 (15). Perhaps reading this succinct analysis, rather than exploring the ideas with Cheah in a seminar, would make these works more palatable to those same students today. Nonetheless, judging from Cheah's experience, professors might want to prepare their students well before assigning all or part of this book as a reading.

*What is a World?* challenges scholars of world literature and postcolonial literature to reconsider and possibly to expand the definition of their fields. It is a thoughtful, theoretical work that further challenges all of us to reconsider the role literature plays in the world(s) around us and to assess our inclusion of literature beyond the Western tradition. Undoubtedly, this book will play an important role in the ongoing dialogue over what world literature really is.

Gregory R. Jackson  
Utah Valley University