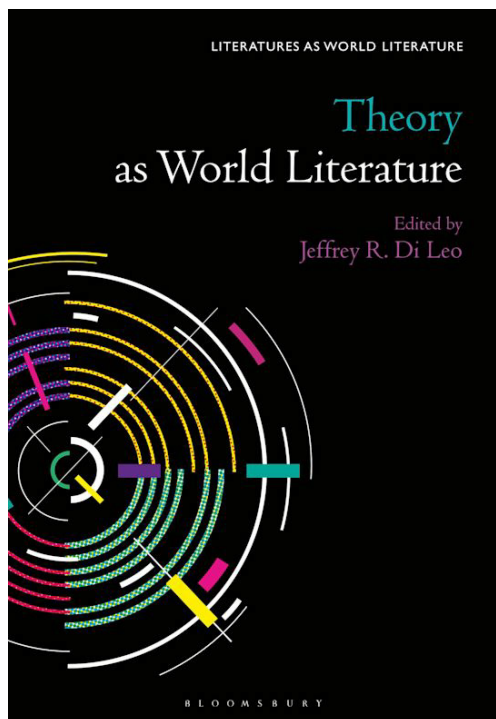


## BOOKS

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### Jeffrey R. Di Leo (ed.), *Theory as World Literature*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025, 284 p.

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Theory as literature: it is easy enough to grasp how these two terms may admit to a relationship of sorts. Certainly, one may very well reject this ‘as’, in an understandable attempt to starkly differentiate the two registers, drawing a line between the philosophical and the aesthetic. Or, conversely, it is equally justifiable to affirm an intimacy between theory and literature, to the point that either one may be considered an extension of, or towards, the other. Irrespective of one’s positioning, there is a rich conceptual tradition to back up either claim, and, in both cases, it makes perfect sense to discuss and problematize theory as literature. Thus, three of four words in the title of this collection, edited by Di Leo, can be comfortably dealt with. The fourth term, however, is much more problematic, and, as if that weren’t enough, it also forms the conceptual core of this collection. What is a ‘world’? What does it mean for literature to be ‘world’ literature, and for theory to

subsequently be defined ‘as world literature’? The ‘worlding’ of theory and literature is a most pressing issue precisely because, despite one’s wholly understandable confusion with respect to the term ‘world’, a pervasive process of neoliberal globalization of cultural manifestations is undoubtedly taking place as we speak. The problem of such a globalization, as Di Leo describes it in the introduction to this collection, is that it risks



disintegrating the cultural specificity of the many theories and literatures of the world into an impossibly convoluted yet also thoroughly homogenized “babble” (4). Regrettable though such consequences of the global age may be, Di Leo keenly argues that a return to isolationist preservations of aesthetics and philosophies is certainly not an adequate solution: “To bracket and not consider them [globalization, postmodernity] because of their potential to provide an “infinite, ungraspable canon of works” in the name of world literature rather than a finite, graspable one is to bury one’s head in the ground of contemporary literary and cultural theory. That is to say, globalization does not go away as a concern for world literature just because it greatly complicates it” (5). We cannot turn against the world, and yet, simultaneously, globalization as an instrument for cultural loss ought to be resisted. We must have a worlding of theory and literature, while at the same time rejecting the world in its globalizing sense. This is the context in which *Theory as World Literature* negotiates tentative formulations and reformulations of ‘the world’: a term which at once affirms and subverts its own meanings and implications.

To do justice to the complexities and subtleties of each contribution to this collection, much more than a mere review is required. Spanning postcolonialism (chapter one), semiotics and psychoanalysis (chapter two), the political aesthetics of realism (chapter three), as well as phenomenology, philology, and what Ranjan Ghosh curiously terms plastic poetics (chapter four), *Theory as World Literature* provides a comprehensive (though not exhaustive) account of ‘world’ and ‘wordliness’ as approached from a plethora of theoretical fields, each with its own unique understanding of a process of ‘worlding’ literature. Nevertheless, what is common to all these perspectives is a fundamental engagement with the ‘world’ as a contradiction in term(s). As previously mentioned, the world literature we are faced with here is meant to resist a global tendency towards homogeneity which makes up the whole world as we know it today. Drawing on Derrida, Di Leo writes that world literature “[...] involves an imperative to act to change the world in response to the advent of the other” (10). A theory of world literature is one which changes ‘the world’, and this change can be so thorough that, in “its most progressive aspect”, it can amount to a radical “de-worlding” (26). At their most impactful, world literature and theory de-world the world: they tear apart the idea of the ‘world’ as a totalizing, unifying global entity, in the attempt to formulate a different understanding of ‘world’. This task acts as a guiding axiom for most of the essays in this collection, and it is to this problem – that of a de-worlded world – that I will restrict my brief reading of *Theory as World Literature* in this review.

In their contribution to the first chapter, “Indigeneity, Decoloniality, and Race”, Colebrook asks: “How inescapable is the world? Are we necessarily always becoming-Hegel, always orienting any text to the horizon of the world that makes a text readable?” (43). In other words, is it necessary that a global superstructure which explains and subsumes all cultures be envisaged – “something like the world in general” (40) – in order for world literature to be tenable? Many of the scholars in this collection will emphatically deny this. In fact, it is precisely by rejecting global meta-narratives, quintessential cultural theories of everything, that a new sense of world literature may emerge. For Colebrook, in a Heideggerian analysis, such radical novelty can be configured “by becoming world-

poor, by walking away from the grand narratives of globalism" (46), which is to say that worlding literature could be understood as a refusal to assert control over the globe by rigorously systematizing culture, as an affirmation of and advocacy for an irreconcilable difference, in the Derridean sense of the term. Along similar lines, Karavanta claims that what they call "archipelagic thought" – as opposed to continentally-grounded traditions – can serve as "a model by which to think about these emerging forms of being-with in the world, forms of being-with that are not accountable to the universal model of man as the citizen-subject" (57). Essential to this type of thinking is its negativity: world literature is "not accountable" to that which the term 'world' traditionally calls to mind: universality, totality, wholeness, and so on. Such negativity is anything but loss. If Hitchcock claims that "[...] as a paradigm, world literature is paradigmatically prone to failure" (77), this is only because failure, in a post-structuralist subversion of conventional binomials, here becomes a measure of success. To not be able to coordinate and structure a coherent theory of world literature is precisely a manner of allowing the fragmentariness and heterogeneity of the world to survive. Thus, for Simek, conceptually mapping a world literature entails "a never-finished project of meaning-making" (101), where this property of 'becoming' that is never reducible to stable 'being' provides an alternative to colonial, repressive worldings of literature which inevitably marginalize an 'other', in favor of a 'same'. In chapter two, "Semiotics and Psychoanalysis", Zalloua convincingly portrays psychoanalysis as a practice which unsettles the foundations of a cohesive cultural 'world' that generates these categories, or identities, of the 'same' and its 'others'. By drawing on Žižek's work, they argue that "[d]ecolonizing the mind is an act of self-violence, symbolic suicide [...] which begins with a disruption of the colonized's affective investments in her own identity" (144). A new world literature, thus, destabilizes constructs one is familiar with in discussing culture from a global perspective. The world changes, it always tumultuously becomes (without ever simply being), and thus the idea of an 'other', or of a 'national culture' can no longer be sustained. As Miller argues in their homage to Kristeva's work, the point of a new sense of worldliness is "the creation of a culture of revolt founded on psychoanalysis and literature" (136), where, crucially, one system is not replaced with another, one world does not yield to another, but rather where "revolt", or de-worlding, as Di Leo has it, becomes a central practice to the task of worlding literature without mitigating radical heterogeneity. In chapter three, "Realisms, Aesthetics, Politics", Veesser further develops this de-worlded sense of world literature by employing Said's life and work as a model for what he calls "worldliness": "[Said] kept insisting that the worldliest person is one who feels at home nowhere [...] Homelessness was, for him, the essential precondition of worldliness" (205). Where there is the stability of the home, the world can only be an oppressively totalitarian notion: one is at home somewhere, in some type of literature, and thus 'other' places and texts emerge as foreign, alien. By contrast, where 'home' is meaningless, the world unfolds without reducing its own complexities to pre-established orders: there is difference, but that difference is not subsumed to a governing, Master identity. This is precisely what, in chapter four, "Phenomenology, Philology, and Plasticity", Wehrs attempts to argue via their reading of Levinas' work: "Levinas contrasts 'peace', predicated on notions of underlying sameness behind surface differences [...] with 'proximity', in which 'an ethical relation' involves relation with 'the

unassimilable other, the irreducible other', so that acknowledgement of and respect for difference are integrated into imperatives to do justice to the 'irreducible other'" (223). What matters is proximity based on differences unresolved, and emphatically not a cultural assimilation based on fundamental similarities which leads to homogenizing peace and stability.

What is 'world' literature, and theory as 'world' literature? First and foremost, this collection shows, it is an anti-system, a way of drawing the literatures of the world in proximity, without resorting to systematizing concepts with which to relate the same to the other, the European to the non-European, and so on. This does not mean that all cultural distinctness is lost, replaced by difference without concept. As many of the contributors I cannot do justice to show, world literature maintains the contextual, historical, and social specificity of literature and theory, be it Latin American (McClennen), European (Di Leo), Chinese, Indian, or Japanese (Higonnet, Beecroft, Ghosh). What disappears, instead, is the capacity to order these literatures in simplistic, comfortably reductive manners, according to the dictates of a central authority. The margins maintain heterogeneity, while the center loses its grasp on their identities, it too ultimately becoming a margin – that is how world literature is born, a fundamentally decolonial process predicated on the irresolvable differences each text gives voice to. Ultimately, *Theory as World Literature* provides no facile blueprint to the formation of such a postcolonial world: after all, it is precisely the illusion of a global system which this collection so thoroughly resists. Yet, in the absence of a 'solution', what this collection keenly shows is that the resistance enacted by world literature is, in itself, an affirmation of a different mode of being – a theory of de-worlding which bears the potential of creating even more of a 'world' than we have now.

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