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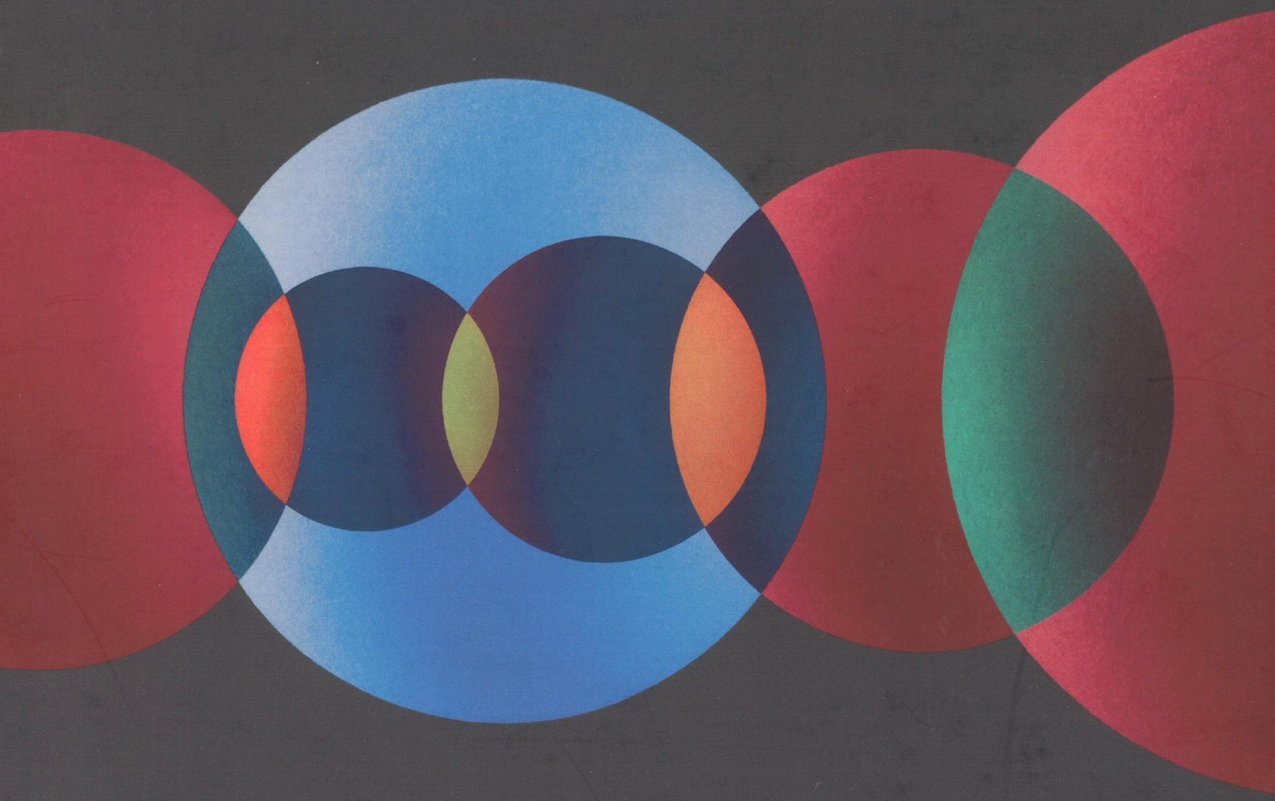

# The Bloomsbury Handbook of WORLD THEORY

Edited by **Jeffrey R. Di Leo** and **Christian Moraru**

BLOOMSBURY

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CHAPTER SEVEN

# Worlding Popular Culture

ESTHER PEEREN

What does it mean to think about *worlding popular culture*? On the face of it, this phrase may suggest little more than an expansion of the scale on which popular culture is contemplated, just as *worlding literature* was taken by advocates of world literature such as David Damrosch to involve extending comparative literature's focus from one on national literatures or Western masterpieces to one on literatures from all over the world "that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language."[1] In this conception of worlding, the world is taken "as a static, geographical expanse"[2] through which literary texts chart specific, more or less predictable or capacious trajectories, with the texts themselves taken as "transparently accessible in translation."[3]

Analogously, worlding popular culture would frame popular culture as a phenomenon occurring and being studied on a worldwide scale, with an emphasis on artifacts that become popular beyond their context of production. This would be much less of a shift in perspective than the turn to world literature was in literary studies, given that the border-crossing of popular cultural artifacts such as Hollywood films has long been a prominent focus of their study. Until recently, the implications of popular culture's worldwide spread have predominantly been theorized through the notions of globalization and transnationalism, but Klavier J. Wang's 2020 *Hong Kong Popular Culture: Worlding Film, Television, and Pop Music* takes up "worlding" for this purpose.[4] As is clear from its structure, which follows chapters on "making" Hong Kong film, TV, and Cantopop with chapters on "worlding" Hong Kong film, TV, and Cantopop, the book conceives of worlding as something that happens to popular cultural artifacts after they have been produced within specific borders. Although Wang does challenge the exclusive definition of contexts of production in national terms by positioning Hong Kong as first and foremost a city, her use of worlding glosses over the fact that many popular cultural artifacts, old and new, are destined for global circulation from their inception and more and more often take the form of international coproductions. In *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Koichi Iwabuchi duly emphasizes the "emergence and proliferation of global media conglomerates" in recent decades, as well as the increasingly "transnational flow of popular culture," yet he does not fully acknowledge the extent to which these developments complicate any straightforward equation of the transnational popularity of Japanese popular culture to Japanese (cultural) power.[5] The sheer persistence with which popular culture—even popular culture as always already globalized—continues to be thought of in terms of national ownership, which involves the "ascription of national characteristics to popular cultural artefacts," is aptly highlighted and contested in Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto's edited volume *Popular Culture, Globalization and Japan*.[6]

For popular culture, then, perhaps even more so than for literature, taking worlding as involving the dispersal of artifacts from a particular national context to other parts of the world ends up reinforcing flawed, blinkered conceptions of how popular culture works. In addition, since such conceptions—including that of popular culture's false attachment to the national—have already been effectively dismantled in work like that of Allen and Sakamoto through the critical conscription of globalization and transnationalism, latching onto worlding for the same purpose would constitute mere faddism.

Yet what if we took worlding popular culture as being about the worlding—the "bringing-and-coming-into-being" of the world[7]—effected by and in popular cultural artifacts? In his 2017 article "Worlding Literature: Living with Tiger Spirits," Pheng Cheah draws on Heidegger to argue that the world is not at all a "spatial container" but a "referential network of meaningfulness that precedes the rational human subject and brings us into relation with other beings."[8] From this perspective, worlding refers to "the opening of a world, where relations between subjects and objects are decomposed into a prior wholeness that supports us at the same time as it makes us defenseless as deliberating intentional subjects."[9] For Cheah, literature that "returns to the openness of world" can prompt a "re-envisioning of relations with others" and thus produce not only a trenchant critique of how the world has been ordered (for example by the notions of the rational subject and the nation-state) but also a vision of a new world based on different relations.[10]

Birgit Kaiser's "Worlding CompLit" shares with Cheah a conception of worlding as being about literary texts creating world. However, instead of invoking Heidegger, Kaiser brings together the work of Karen Barad, Edouard Glissant, and Jean-Luc Nancy to propose a diffractive account of world as "intra-active relationality."[11] Far from meeting "as objects of national (or regional) descent, pre-existing their encounters in a comparison," as Wang's and Damrosch's notions of worlding propose, literary texts are seen as "'relata' whose qualities and effects are specified by way of relating, while specifying the 'apparatus' (the texts, the reading and the reader) at the same time."[12] Significantly, Kaiser also moves beyond Cheah's account of worlding by presenting the latter not as a deliberate, disintegrating intervention that enables a return to an undifferentiated "prior wholeness" wherefrom relationality can then take new forms, but as disclosing how "the world in each 'phenomenon' is a congealing of a continuous *spacetimemattering*."[13] There is, in this diffractive account, no before or after relationality, no opening up or closing of world, only a continuing co-creation of world and a question of whether particular practices of (comparative) reading do or do not acknowledge and respect how "'world' as the co-appearance of all relating 'parts'" demands "a continuous *faire-monde*" or worldmaking.[14]

Can such a diffractive conceptualization of worlding be transferred to the realm of popular culture? To answer this question, it is first of all important to recognize that popular culture is a much more diffuse or "overpopulated" cultural form than literature.[15] It can comprise many different media, including certain forms of literature, as well as social practices, and it refers both to mass culture as "culture which is widely favoured or well-liked by many people" and to "culture which originates from 'the people,'" which might be folk culture, working-class culture, subculture, or counterculture.[16] In the wake of Horkheimer and Adorno's notorious takedown of the culture industry in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, mass culture has been widely disparaged as lacking critical force and as reifying advanced capitalism's globalism. As John Storey puts it, from this perspective, "economic success is assumed to be the same as cultural imposition."[17] With cultural imposition suggesting a replication and reaffirmation of world rather than its remaking, it is hardly surprising that proponents of this take on

popular culture regard its worlding force with skepticism. Importantly, whereas Kaiser presents worlding as something co-effected by all cultural forms, as all are among the relata whose entanglement makes up world, Cheah assigns worlding power to a certain subsection of literary works only—those that return "to the openness of world"—and considers mass culture particularly unlikely to have such power.

The manner in which Cheah renders mass culture and worlding virtually incompatible is worth a close look. It starts when, in his discussion of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century "normative conception of world literature," he identifies the rejection of mass culture as the one aspect of this normative conception that was wrongly left behind by more recent notions of world literature like Damrosch's, which Cheah considers banalizing.[18] Accordingly, Cheah approvingly notes how normative world literature's spiritualist ideal of "revealing humanity" required the historical overcoming of "uncultivated popular taste."[19] In his view, it is precisely the renewed acceptance of uncultivated popular taste as central to world literature and global capitalism alike that precludes worlding as an opening and potential rearrangement of world. The worlding capacity of literary texts designed to appeal to globally shared popular tastes is rendered suspect by comparing these texts to a particularly uncultured and unimaginative commodity:

> [J]ust because some literary works are produced globally for circulation in a global marketplace does not automatically make them world literature in the normative sense unless one also says that a McDonald's hamburger, which has been "translated" into different shapes to cater to global consumers ... is similarly worldly.[20]

Thus, although Cheah is critical of and eager to move beyond many aspects of the normative conception of world literature, most notably its entrenched anthropocentrism, his notion of a new normative world literature revives and affirms this conception's rejection of mass culture, which, he implies (not least through the inclusion in his article of an image of the Singaporean McDonald's website featuring vernacularized items like the Chendol McFlurry and the Nasi Lemak Burger), it would be rather absurd to consider capable of worlding.

Curiously, though, the novel through which Cheah proceeds to develop his account of worlding in the remainder of the article, Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau* (2004), translated into English as *Man Tiger* (2015), is described as drawing on "popular cultural influences" such as pulp fiction and comic books, as well as on "supernatural elements from Indonesian folklore and myth."[21] Lest this should appear to rehabilitate mass culture and assign it worlding power, Cheah's discussion of the novel installs a strict separation between the two forms of popular culture at stake, mass culture and folk culture. This is achieved by temporalizing the effect of these different forms on both Kurniawan and the novel's protagonist, Margio. Pulp fiction, comic books, and popular literature about tiger myths are presented as having impressed the writer "as a youth" and "as a child," and as having constituted "Margio's childhood reading."[22] Hence, in line with the normative conception of world literature, the attachment to mass culture and its imaginative power is placed in the past as something appropriately left behind in adulthood. Folk culture, in contrast, is presented as an enduring influence on Kurniawan and Margio and put at the center of Cheah's reading of the novel as worlding literature. It is the Indonesian belief in tiger spirits that is seen to function as the ambivalent means through which "the openness of worlding" is instantiated in the novel, in a way that, crucially, also challenges the traditional form of this belief.[23] Folk culture, then, is envisioned as capable of opening (up the) world by dismantling even its own established

form, while mass culture's worlding power, confined to the realm of immaturity, is marked as inferior.

Within Cheah's article, however, an alternative reading of mass culture is opened up by a quote from an interview with Kurniawan in which he questions why neither Kafka nor the superheroes of DC and Marvel are regarded as belonging to the genre of magical realism, despite their fantastical elements. Besides formulating a sharp critique of magical realism as a reductive category in what Cheah calls "the global literature approach"[24] that makes non-Western literature easier to process for Western readers, Kurniawan here also hints at the possibility of conceiving of Kafka, comic superheroes, and magical realist works of literature as sharing the capacity to bring alternative worlds into being through fantasy. What the quote conjures is not an image of cultural hybridity ripe for ridicule, as Cheah does with the picture of McDonald's glocally translated burger, but one of ostensibly disparate forms of culture, including vastly popular and economically lucrative ones, as all having worlding force.

In order not to be perceived as silly or naïve, such an image needs to draw on a notion of worlding that, instead of requiring it to instantiate a radical return to a "prior wholeness"[25] emptied out of all existing relationalities, would be taken, following Kaiser, as an ongoing, inherently relational worldmaking that, depending on the relata's intra-action (through which these relata themselves emerge), could move in different directions, toward or away from the homogenizing globalization Cheah has McDonald's embody. As Christian Moraru also points out in his *Reading for the Planet: Toward a Geomethodology*, globalization is not the only possible or even the currently all-encompassing "worlding narrative," for "the world remains a resilient trope and space of the variegated, the mysterious, and illimitable and thus considerably more complex as structure than the globe."[26] By opposing globe not to world, as Cheah does, but to the planetary, Moraru opens up both the notion of world and that of worlding. Worlding no longer necessarily is an opening up of world, as there can be worlding "into globe"—into "the homogenous, the circular, the repetitive, and the selfsame"—or worlding into planetarization—into the "capacious and integrative"—or even both at the same time.[27] In Moraru's words,

> it is precisely because the world is still worlding, coming together—because the world is (also) "planetarizing" rather than (only) globalizing—that one can take a critical-"progressive" look at it and possibly "perfect" it along these lines, that is, not hone it into utopic perfection but complete it by harnessing it to a vision more inspiring and empowering than that at work in many of today's corporatist and neoimperialist-territorialist adventures.[28]

Inspiring and empowering planetarizing visions of this kind may, I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, very well appear in mass culture.

Jennifer Wenzel's *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature* offers another useful jumping-off point for this argument in the "capacious" framing of world literature it espouses, which involves "juxtaposing global bestsellers (often dismissed as 'airport literature') and visual culture with more conventionally literary texts ... to consider how different kinds of texts foster and complicate the work of world-imagining and reading across geographic and experiential divides."[29] For Wenzel, worlding consists in the "work of world-imagining," an ongoing relational process that in and of itself does not have a particular direction and in which mass culture is as much involved as any other form of culture.[30] As she notes, "I understand literature and cultural imagining as a mesh of relations in which the

liberatory and immiserating implications of globalizations—old and new—are knit and can be laid bare."[31] The pluralization of "globalizations" here indicates a refusal to equate all forms of the global to homogenization or the capitalist world market. In addition, Wenzel insists that instead of dismissing the world that corporations like McDonald's imagine as fully alienated and not "truly human" in the manner of Cheah,[32] it is important to understand how such corporate worlds contribute to shaping "the world we inhabit" and how they may be engaged with—antagonistically, but also strategically—through "*world-imagining[s] from below*, where marginalized characters or documentary subjects situate their precarious local condition within a transnational context."[33] From such engagements can emerge new, more inclusive worldings that nonetheless may also remain imbricated in and even to a degree complicit with corporate world-imaginings.

Popular culture in all its forms may thus yield world-imaginings from below or contribute to what Moraru calls "planetary poetics."[34] Far from inevitably confirming "the prevailing constructions of globality," or at best achieving worlding capacity only for the young and naïve, popular culture, including mass culture, may work to "connect the planet's dots in ways that make visible new configurations, allotments, and hierarchies of space, discourse, community, and power,"[35] without necessarily dissolving the old configurations entirely. Two recent mass cultural artifacts that underline both the potential and limitations of such a (re)worlding (re)connection of dots are Ryan Coogler's 2018 film *Black Panther*, based on a Marvel superhero comic, and the FX channel's television series *Pose* (2018–2019), which fictionalizes the underground New York ballroom scene at the height of the AIDS pandemic in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and which was recently renewed for a third season.

Coogler's *Black Panther*, which features a predominantly black cast led by the titular black superhero, is about as globally popular and cultural artifact as one can think of: dispelling the "black films don't travel myth,"[36] it grossed over a billion dollars worldwide in its first month.[37] It was also widely seen as offering audiences—a large proportion of which were non-white[38]—a new perspective on the world and the position of blackness in it, through its portrayal of Wakanda, the fictional African nation from which the Black Panther hails. Renée T. White specifically positions the film as a world-imagining from below in Wenzel's sense in a review essay entitled "I Dream a World: *Black Panther* and the Re-Making of Blackness." For White, *Black Panther*'s "uncolonizing imagination"[39] of "a wholly self-contained, autonomous African ecosystem"[40] makes it an Afrofuturist project that "merge[s] culture, tradition, time, space, and technology to present alternative interpretations of blackness."[41] In addition, it shares the anticolonial Third Cinema movement's aim of "using the tools of cultural production to mold 'national consciousness, giving it a form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons.'"[42] This, however, is not an imagination that completely decomposes world, for the alternative, never-colonized world of Wakanda is still surrounded by our twenty-first-century post/neocolonial world in which the systemic legacies of colonialism and slavery are everywhere palpable—including in the ease with which Wakanda is able to pass itself off as a poor, rural economy. In fact, the film revolves around the shifting relation between its dreamt world of Wakanda and the current world order it mirrors outside Wakanda, as the challenge brought to the reign of the current Black Panther, T'Challa, by Killmonger, the US-born and raised son of T'Challa's uncle, leads Wakanda to emerge from its isolationist stance (which saw it intervene in global affairs only covertly) and show "itself to the world,"[43] which thus turns out to never have been the (whole, true) world. It is in this idea, namely, that the world may all the time have been different from how it was hegemonically imagined, as well as in the film's final pre-end credits scene, in which

a Wakandan aircraft lands in Oakland, California, and a young basketball-playing boy feels himself repositioned in the world as he identifies T'Challa as the aircraft's owner, that the (re)worlding force of *Black Panther* comes to the fore.

White stresses that the film received a "seismic reaction from black audiences around the globe," which experienced "mass psychic relief" at finding themselves represented from a non-mainstream (non-white) perspective.[44] In her contribution to a roundtable on *Black Panther* in *Safundi*, Carli Coetzee dubs this reaction "Wakanda fever," a term that is perhaps misplaced given her insistence that African audiences, while excited by the film's centering of black experience, "reacted in the creative (and resistant) ways theorized by scholars of African popular cultural studies," which included censuring its regurgitation of African and black stereotypes.[45]

Political geographer Robert A. Saunders, too, acknowledges *Black Panther*'s role as "a transformative artifact," especially for black audiences, when he notes that "while no such nation as Wakanda exists on the map, it has become real in the minds [of] those who sat in dimly-lit theatres around the globe, thus serving a symbol of the 'black cognitive and cultural capacities' that have been long derided by (white) Western Civilization."[46] However, in a reading of the film that strongly resonates with Cheah's skepticism about mass culture's worlding power, he sees this making real of a different world—which both White and Coetzee suggest constitutes a re-worlding—as overshadowed and essentially invalidated by its status as a product of the global culture industry. The fact that *Black Panther* was produced by Marvel Studios LLC (owned by Disney) with the aim of making it a commercial success apparently makes it impossible for its imaginaries to be anything more than cynical co-optations—tellingly, the main title of Saunders's article is "(Profitable) Imaginaries of Black Power"—and for its audiences to be anything other than dupes.

My problem with Saunders's reading is not that I think he is wrong to point to the aspects of *Black Panther* that show it to also be an affirmation of the world-as-is. It is undoubtedly true that the film reinforces a view of Africa as undifferentiated in its portrayal of Wakanda as "all over the place" in terms of its geography and the traditions it draws on.[47] And the film also positions Africa as a "space of violence" by having its sole reference to events on the continent outside Wakanda evoke Boko Haram and by depicting the Black Panther succession ceremony as involving hand-to-hand combat.[48] Equally, it is hard to argue with Saunders's account of the film as espousing "monarchophilia" in its portrayal of Wakanda's royal family (which even Killmonger turns out to be part of) or with his reading of the film's ending as involving T'Challa "becom[ing] a convert [to] the neoliberal order."[49]

This ending—and its interpretation by Saunders—deserves a little more attention because it is really a second ending, coming after the Oakland-set one discussed by White and after the film's end credits. Showing T'Challa giving an address to the United Nations in New York and announcing Wakanda's entry onto the world stage as an engaged global power can indeed be seen as "espousing a form of humanistic, black/brown-friendly globalism."[50] Through statements like "the illusions of divisions threaten our very division" and "we must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe," the address dismisses movements like Black Lives Matter as misguided and conjures a post-racial future enabled not by a true reckoning with global systemic racism but by a black leader advocating colorblindness.[51] Thus, Saunders has a point when he contends that this ending envisions Wakanda's unveiled entry into the world not as transforming the UN and its hegemonic neoliberal world-imagining but as affirming it.

Still, I want to suggest that the import of this second ending is lessened by its placement after the end credits (appearing only when most audience members who are not diehard Marvel fans will have already left the theater) and by its being followed by yet another, third ending designed to set up another film in Marvel's superhero universe (this ending shows Winter Soldier, a character brainwashed in *Captain America: Civil War* [2016], being cared for in Wakanda). Saunders's statement that "Marvel Studios uses *the last moments* of its highly-profitable geopolitical intervention to sell its audience a faulty 'universalism' girded by the 'inevitability' of the global success of the neoliberal project"[52] is therefore not accurate and underlines precisely how viewers of mass cultural artifacts, far from being passive receivers of a message sent by the artifact's maker (a message that in itself may not be coherent and a maker that is never a singular entity), are in fact active co-creators of this message through the different perspectives they bring to a film like *Black Panther* and the selective ways in which they watch and remember it. The film's three endings are, of course, part of a commercial ploy to line up audiences for the next Marvel superhero movie, but they also enable different viewers to come to different conclusions about what world-imagining(s) the film ultimately presents or privileges.

For Saunders, the second ending eclipses the other two endings (which he does not refer to at all), just as the fact that the film can be seen as "a for-profit co-optation of black suffering on [a] political-economic level" trumps all other possible ways of reading it.[53] If, as the title of his article already suggests, a profitable imagination cannot be a truly resistant one, then those who insist that they are capable of watching *Black Panther* as worlding world simultaneously, ambiguously, according to (stereo)type and beyond it (into globe *and* planet, to speak with Moraru) can only be regarded as hopelessly naïve. The latter charge is particularly problematic when it is leveled against audiences that were long marked as not counting by what Wenzel calls "unimagining," an active practice of containment that consists of "draw[ing] a comforting line of distance and difference around [something], to pull back from the work of engagement and understanding."[54] Holding onto a purist notion of worlding in Cheah's vein may therefore perpetuate exclusions of certain popular cultural forms and audiences. This danger is avoided if worlding is instead seen, in line with the conceptualizations of Kaiser, Moraru, and Wenzel, as an uncertain and imperfect process that is, as Moraru puts it, "aspirational."[55] Planetary imaginations or world-imaginings from below do not necessarily transform world completely, but "capture a reality, or at least its seeds, and, critical of its world context, paint concurrently a different world in the offing."[56]

That profitability and worlding can coexist is also affirmed by Phoebe Macrossan's discussion of worlding as the strategy characterizing the "star project" of the black singer Beyoncé, which runs through her music, videos, performances, and (social) media presence. Against critics who have, in the manner of Saunders, argued that Beyoncé's "status as mass commercial product" taints any feminist or anti-racist political meanings her work may generate, Macrossan insists that the "Beyoncé World" so carefully created and maintained by the star, while certainly being geared toward increasing her fame and wealth, also posits alternate realities that feed off and enter into a critical dialogue with the world-as-is, potentially co-creating it otherwise.[57] Beyoncé's 2016 *Lemonade* video, for example, features an "anachronistic, fantastical and utopian"[58] American South free from white slaveowners that, Macrossan emphasizes, is not taken by Beyoncé's audience—which is "aware of the processes of presentation of Beyoncé World"[59]—as real, authentic, or uncommodified. Instead, it is recognized as a strategic, aspirational world-imagining that empowers Beyoncé

and her black fans through "a quite deliberate situating of oneself on the border of different belongings so as the rebuild the world as more open-ended."[60]

Here, I want to turn to the second season of *Pose* as offering a final, particularly layered reflection on the ambivalent worlding force of mass culture. The first season of this successful television series, set in 1987 and 1988, illustrates a subculture's worldmaking by showing how the queer black and Latinx main characters, violently unimagined by the racist, homophobic, and transphobic mainstream world, have built an alternative underground world constituted of strong, non-heteronormative families. At the same time, it shows the limitations of this worlding in the way the community is being decimated by the AIDS epidemic, which the mainstream world resolutely refuses to address. The second season takes place in 1990–1991 and is framed by the mainstreaming of ball culture through Madonna's global hit single *Vogue*. Episode 5 opens with a black female TV reporter standing in front of a line of white, middle-class suburban women at the YMCA proclaiming that "in 1990, all anyone wants is to vogue." She continues to note that "the once obscure dance moves, popularized by the material girl's hit, borrowed from New York's hidden ball culture, are now truly in fashion." Here, the mass cultural popularization of voguing is framed, from the perspective of the mainstream world, as involving the bringing to light—through an innocuous act of borrowing—of something that was obscure and hidden. Notably, this illumination does not comprise ball culture as a whole, in all its countercultural force, but only the dance moves, which, the reporter stresses, were not "truly" fashionable until adopted by Madonna. Concurrently, the reporter's reference to Madonna as "the material girl" (after another of her hit songs) by suggesting that a profit motive lies behind the "borrowing" of ball culture identifies voguing's popularization as a capitalist commodification.

In the next scene, Damon, a member of the House of Evangelista, is shown teaching white women to vogue and being scouted by one of them to audition for Madonna's Blond Ambition world tour. The suggestion here is that the mainstreaming of voguing could be profitable for all, for Madonna, but also for Damon (who is already making money from the vogue lessons) and his friend and former lover Ricky, who is also asked to audition. A discussion between their respective House mothers, Blanca Evangelista and Elektra Wintour, extends this potential profitability to the realm of cultural and symbolic capital, as Blanca proposes that voguing, being performed across the world, will enable everyone in the underground ball scene to finally be seen and acknowledged as part of the mainstream world:

> Don't you see that this is not just an opportunity for Damon or Ricky. They standing in for all of us. You may be seven foot tall, hobnobbing with the glitterati but no one really sees you. No one sees any of us. Not until right now, this moment. How are they going to ignore any of us when one of our own is up there dancing in front of thousands of people? You know what, you are one of us and the light that those boys are about to shine our way is going to light you up, too.

It is significant that these words are spoken by Blanca, who, throughout the series, appears as the idealistic and caring counterpart to Elektra's cynicism and narcissistic cruelty. Viewers who have seen Blanca disappointed (though never defeated) before and who, furthermore, know from living in the late 2010s that trans women like Elektra continue to be "lighted up" in predominantly violent and often deadly ways, are unlikely to accept this vision as prophetic. However, that does not mean that they cannot still appreciate it as an aspirational world-imagining from below inspired by Madonna (a star who also pushed against mainstream

culture's gender norms), which, even if only temporarily, gave hope to unimagined subjects like Blanca that the world might become more inclusive.

The episode continues with Ricky and Damon talking about their future in a way that echoes Blanca's hopefulness, yet this time the viewer is cued to the precariousness of their hopes by the soundtrack's playing of the Milli Vanilli song *Girl I'm Gonna Miss You*. The song's first line—"[I]t's a tragedy for me to see the dream is over"—offers a strong hint that neither the boys' dream of dancing with Madonna nor the rekindling of their relationship will be realized. Furthermore, the scene encourages viewers familiar with the story of Milli Vanilli to connect the fact that, after two global hit records, the faces of the band, Fab Morvan and Rob Pilatus, were discovered not to be the actual singers (who were deemed too old and unattractive to be marketable) to Madonna becoming the face of voguing. This connection recodes what the reporter called "borrowing" as a reproachable act of appropriation, in this case of a lower-class queer black subculture by a wealthy cis-gendered woman whose whiteness is highlighted in the title of her world tour. Yet, at the same time, *Pose* consistently emphasizes that cultural flows are dynamic and complex, and that a particular popular practice can never truly be "owned" by any one community, whether mainstream or not. The series makes clear, for example, how voguing was connected to the mainstream in its very origins as it was the high-fashion magazine *Vogue* that inspired and gave its name to the dance style. A profitable imagination instrumental in co-creating the world of 1980s American consumer capitalism became a way for those unimagined in that world to become winners and find fame in the ball world; far from representing a full endorsement of consumer capitalism, though, the practice of voguing also undermined it by showing that designer outfits could be cheaply copied and by mopping or stealing garments and accessories, as shown in *Pose*'s very first episode.

In the end, Damon and Ricky are not picked for the Blond Ambition tour—the spot goes to a professional dancer with no experience of ball culture—but the voguing craze does land them a job as dancers on a short-lived revival of the fictional Sound of Gold television show and, in episode 8, enables Damon to join the European tour of Malcolm McLaren, a white English promotor and artist who preceded Madonna's popularization of voguing with his 1989 hit single *Deep in Vogue*. Ultimately, then, *Pose* refrains from endorsing both Blanca's overly optimistic reading of what the popularization of voguing will do for the ball world and a fully cynical reading in Saunders's image that would see voguing's mass dissemination as not actually doing anything in terms of re-creating world. Instead, the show proposes a more nuanced assessment of popular culture's worlding force. Because of its inevitable participation in profit-driven industries seeking to appropriate subcultural forms and empty them out of anything that would truly threaten the neoliberal order, mass culture may not easily lend itself to the purist and arguably elitist "normative project" of Cheah's worlding,[61] but it *is* compatible with worlding conceived as a less certain, inherently relational, and ongoing process that involves audiences as active co-creators.

Watching *Pose* in 2020, during the Covid-19 crisis, which resonates and contrasts with the AIDS crisis in complex ways, and as the Black Lives Matter movement resurged and gained global momentum after the tragic police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, added further layers to its work as a world-imagining, underlining how a (popular) cultural object's worlding force may wane or intensify depending on the world it is encountered in. Here, the writings of Mikhail M. Bakhtin are pertinent: not only was he a strong proponent of the world-(re)making power of popular culture (although admittedly more as folk than mass culture), but in his essay on the chronotope he also stresses that there is never only one world but always a dynamic, dialogic inter (Kaiser would say intra) action between many

worlds by which all these worlds are continually made or worlded anew: "[T]he work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world, as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers."[62] By replacing "represented" with "worlded" and by reading "work" as comprising not just the literary work but all other art forms and types of popular cultural artifacts, this quote comes to express what I have wanted to say in this chapter about worlding popular culture: that worlding force is not something a particular (popular) artifact either does or does not have, but something that it may have to different degrees and in different directions (toward what Wenzel calls "*quarantines of the imagination*" and "*gentrification of the imagination*"[63] or away from them, toward the globe or the planet or something else again) depending not only on its content and form but also on whom it is encountered by and in what context.

## NOTES

1 David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.
2 Birgit Mara Kaiser, "Worlding CompLit: Diffractive Reading with Barad, Glissant and Nancy," *Parallax* 20.3 (2014): 276.
3 Theo D'haen, "Worlding World Literature," *Recherches littéraires/Literary Research* 32 (Summer 2016): 13.
4 Klavier J. Wang, *Hong Kong Popular Culture: Worlding Film, Television, and Pop Music* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
5 Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 4, 6.
6 Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto, "Introduction: Inside-out Japan? Popular Culture and Globalization in the Context of Japan," in *Popular Culture, Globalization and Japan*, eds. Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto (London: Routledge, 2006), 3.
7 Pheng Cheah, "Worlding Literature: Living with Tiger Spirits," *Diacritics* 45.2 (2017): 94.
8 Cheah, "Worlding Literature," 93.
9 Ibid., 107.
10 Ibid.
11 Kaiser, "Worlding CompLit," 276.
12 Ibid., 276–7.
13 Ibid., 278; emphasis in text.
14 Ibid., 283.
15 Esther Peeren, *Intersubjectivities and Popular Culture: Bakhtin and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 20.
16 John Storey, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 7, 12.
17 John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture: From Folklore to Globalization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 110.
18 Cheah, "Worlding Literature," 88.
19 Ibid., 88, 89.
20 Ibid., 89–90.
21 Ibid., 100.
22 Ibid., 100, 101.
23 Ibid., 106.
24 Ibid., 101.
25 Ibid., 95.

26 Christian Moraru, *Reading for the Planet: Toward a Geomethodology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 25, 29.
27 Ibid., 29, 73.
28 Ibid., 31.
29 Jennifer Wenzel, *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 8.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Cheah, "Worlding Literature," 90.
33 Wenzel, *The Disposition of Nature*, 9; emphasis in text.
34 Moraru, *Reading for the Planet*, 70.
35 Ibid., 74, 69.
36 Alissa Wilkinson, "Black Panther Crushed Overseas Sales Projections: Can We Stop Saying 'Black Films Don't Travel'?" *Vox* (February 20, 2018), https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/2/20/17029156/black-panther-international-overseas-box-office-black-films-hidden-figures-proud-mary.
37 Robert A. Saunders, "(Profitable) Imaginaries of Black Power: The Popular and Political Geographies of Black Panther," *Political Geography* 69 (2019): 143.
38 Wilkinson notes that "thirty-seven percent of the movie's opening weekend audience in North America was African American, compared to the 15 percent who typically comprise the Marvel movie demographic; Caucasians made up 35 percent of the audience." Wilkinson, "Black Panther Crushed Overseas Sales Projections."
39 Renée T. White, "I Dream a World: Black Panther and the Re-Making of Blackness," *New Political Science* 40.2 (2018): 424.
40 Ibid., 422.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 423. White is quoting Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.
43 Ibid., 427.
44 Ibid., 426.
45 Carli Coetzee, "Between the World and Wakanda," *Safundi* 20.1 (2019): 22.
46 Saunders, "(Profitable) Imaginaries of Black Power," 147.
47 Ibid., 144.
48 Ibid., 139.
49 Ibid., 145.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 147; emphasis added.
53 Ibid., 140.
54 Wenzel, *The Disposition of Nature*, 18.
55 Moraru, *Reading for the Planet*, 59.
56 Ibid.
57 Phoebe Macrossan, "Intimacy, Authenticity and 'Worlding' in Beyoncé's Star Project," in *Popular Music, Stars and Stardom*, eds. Stephen Loy, Julie Rickwood, and Samantha Bennett (Acton: Australian National University Press, 2018), 142n9.
58 Ibid.,143.
59 Ibid., 147.
60 Daniel P. S. Goh, ed., *Worlding Multiculturalisms: The Politics of Inter-Asian Dwelling* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 9.
61 Cheah, "Worlding Literature," 87.
62 Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 254.
63 Wenzel, *The Disposition of Nature*, 9; emphases in text.

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