

PROJECT ONE:

[WorldLiterature@UCLA](#)

Tracking International Publics with Goethe

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World Literature before Goethe

In *What is World Literature?* (2003), David Damrosch returns to the famous conversation between Goethe and Eckermann on January 31, 1827 to define world literature as “a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike” (5). This “newly minted term,” Damrosch argues, stands for an imaginary and translational gateway to exchanging ideas across cultural, linguistic, and national borderlines (1). Open to the world beyond nation and constitutive of a “literary analog” to “liberal democracy,” world literature fosters cosmopolitan consciousness especially in Germany, which does not yet count as a proper nation (15). According to Damrosch, this means that world literature is “less a set of works than a network” (3). Neither the sum of all literatures published in the world’s languages nor the canon of European literatures to be read around the globe, it functions as an umbrella term for literature on the move.

Goethe’s renowned statement on the basis of which Damrosch presents this distinctly network-like, translational assessment of world literature reads as follows: “National-Literatur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Welt-Literatur ist an der Zeit und jeder muß dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen” (Eckermann 174). Goethe allegedly makes this stunning assertion while speaking with Eckermann about an unnamed Chinese novel. Contrary to the latter’s expectations, the former finds the foreign text more similar than “fremdartig” (172). It shows, as Goethe claims, how the Chinese “denken, handeln und empfinden fast ebenso wie wir” (172). Not only that. Goethe adds that “man fühlt sich sehr bald als ihresgleichen, nur daß bei ihnen alles klarer, reinlicher und sittlicher zugeht” (172). By that he means a “strenge Mäßigung” in poetic expression and moral consideration, a harmonious reflection between the external environment and the internal world (173).¹ As Eckermann remembers the conversation, Goethe reaches this conclusion before observing that poetry is “ein Gemeingut der Menschheit” (173). It is not a rare thing at all. Therefore, Germans ought to read more foreign literature—that is, literature originally written in another language and illustrative of another world—to escape from their “pedantischen Dünkel” (174).

¹ For Goethe’s interest in the close relationship between nature and humanity in Chinese Buddhism and Daoism, see Katharina Mommsen (Mommsen 320).

Damrosch's definition of world literature grounded in translation studies has recently gained traction across the humanities, emerging as the dominant framework for tracking literary texts across cultural, linguistic, and national borderlines (see Figure 1). By identifying Goethe as a seminal point of departure for world literature, Damrosch offers a conceptual way of assembling international networks of writers and readers whose critical literary activity opens up world cultures, past and present, to new audiences. With carefully chosen case studies, including the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Mechthild von Magdeburg, Kafka, and Rigoberta Menchú, Damrosch models literary encounters between conflicting cultural values, different historical contexts, and communities of readers. This conceptualization has received substantial institutional backing from universities, institutes, and publishers that are interested in reaching international audiences.²

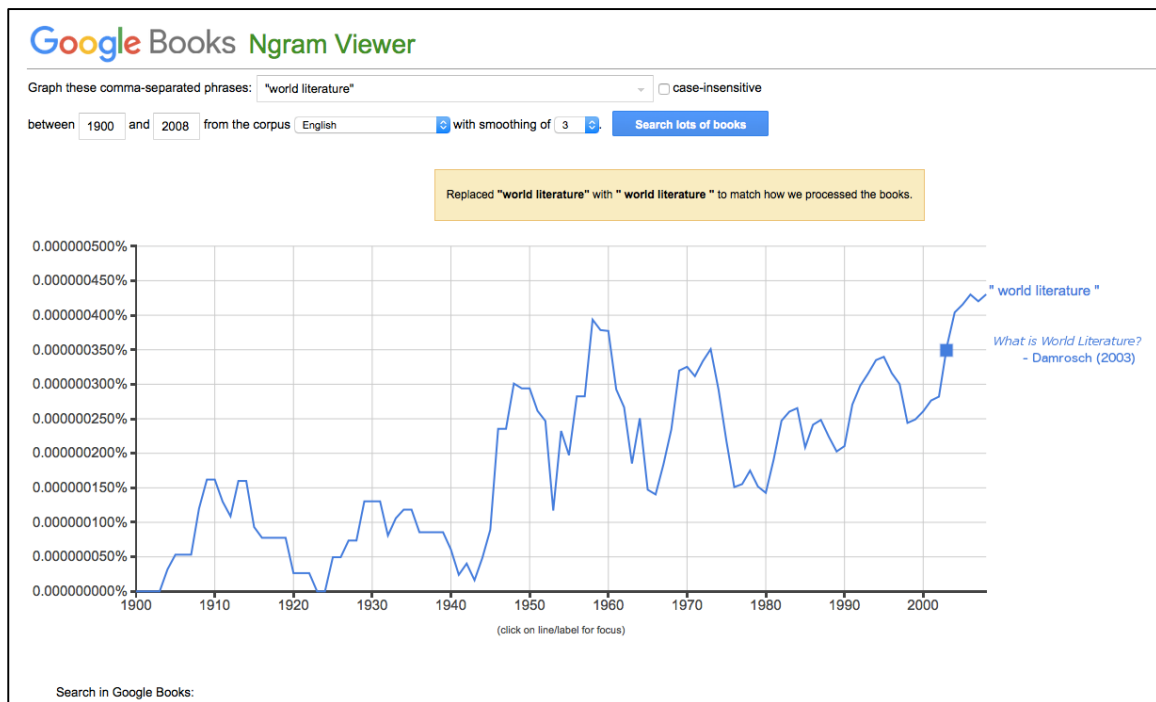


Figure 1: A Google Ngram Viewer Graph of the term “world literature” between 1900 and 2008 (accessed November 17, 2015).

Nevertheless, Damrosch's model has come under criticism for still operating under Eurocentric assumptions about the goodness of translations, the universality of Western interpretive classifications, and modernist tropes.³ Although world literature signals a certain politics of translation whereby cultures, languages, histories, and nations are not related to one another on equal terms, approaching it, as Damrosch does, through the

² Since transitioning from Columbia University to Harvard University, Damrosch has created the Institute for World Literature with affiliated organizations around the globe. For an illustration of this institutional network, see [here](#).

³ For a critique of the double bind between translation studies and World Literature as an institutionalized, if not entrepreneurial, movement, see Emily Apter's *Against World Literature* (2013). In this book, Apter criticizes the notion that everything is translatable and thus good. She goes on to salvage untranslatability as “a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors” (Apter 3).

translational lens in American literary studies fails to account for incommensurability, mistranslation, and non-equivalence as key features of any literary world-making process. The point is not to confuse world literature with an appreciation for the diversity of literary works written and read around the globe or even with a “conflicting multiplicity of separate national traditions,” but to conceive of it as a contentious encounter between cultural norms and signifying practices (Damrosch 5). Instead of following the chronological order of world literature from Goethe to Marx, Georg Lukács, Thomas Mann, and Erich Auerbach, this alternative imagination entails investigating deep historical connections between East and West and between North and South, going as far back as to the beginning of European colonial history. World literature stands for the desire both in comparative literature and in literary postcolonialism to move beyond Eurocentric and urban-oriented approaches to cultural products.

Given the critical and more affirmative interest in world literature since the 1990s, it is not surprising that scholars of world literature have begun to discover lingering blind spots in Damrosch’s otherwise instructive book.⁴ But the question of deprovincializing world literature arises at the very heart of Goethe’s announcement, raising further doubts about Damrosch’s conception of world literature. For example, what is the identity of the Chinese novel? Since Goethe did not speak Chinese, he must have read it in translation. What was the translation and who was its translator? Damrosch never asks these questions and his readers, too, tend to gloss over them, although addressing these queries unravels how the history of world literature does not begin with Goethe after all. As it turns out, his elusive notion of *Weltliteratur* originates in an already vibrant discourse on Orientalism around 1800.

[WorldLiterature@UCLA](#) is a digital humanities project that brings together the content and methodology of various disciplines to excavate the multilayered conceptual history of world literature. Its aim is to document Goethe’s translational network of writers and thinkers with the purpose of illuminating Orientalist texts and travel literatures in this diverse community. Given the many languages and fields that are involved in this project, conventional humanistic modes of knowledge production primarily through close reading are complemented with collaborative research in data curation and visualization, image analysis, geospatial mapping, and digital publishing. *WorldLiterature@UCLA* offers, to borrow Johanna Drucker’s words, “a critical interface design” through which the complexity of world literature is configured as a dynamic network of communication between scholars and writers about the Orient regarding language, literature, art, history, religion, geography, and so forth (Drucker 41).⁵ That this intellectual endeavor exceeds the

⁴ One key issue has to do with the attribution of *Weltliteratur* to Goethe. In 1987, Hans-Joachim Weitz explained that the term had appeared some time between 1790 and 1813 in one of Wieland’s handwritten notes on translating Horace from Latin into German. Hans-Joachim Weitz, “‘Weltliteratur’ zuerst bei Wieland.” *Arcadia* 22.1 (1987): 206-208. In 2008, Wolfgang Schamoni corrected this historicization by pinpointing the first use of *Weltliteratur* in August Ludwig Schlözer’s 1773 book *Isländische Litteratur und Geschichte*. Here, the word referred to the translated corpus of Icelandic literature as part of a scientific attempt to generate a systematic knowledge of foreign cultures, literatures, and languages during the eighteenth century. Wolfgang Schamoni, “‘Weltliteratur’—zuerst 1773 bei August Ludwig Schlözer.” *Arcadia* 43.2 (2008): 288-298.

⁵ According to Drucker, what a critical interface design affords is the realization that interpretation is always already included in the network of computational platforms for creative scholarship. She writes: “The critical design of interpretative interface means that we understand the task not just as an arrangement of things or a structure for the organization of behaviors and actions, but as the mobilization of a critical network

scope of any discipline-specific study with translational movement at its core is the main reason why world literature is an ideal subject of digital humanities scholarship.

Damrosch mentions a handful of German Romanticists—the Schlegel brothers, Ludwig Tieck, and Jean Paul—who make up Goethe’s intellectual network in Jena. Of course, this small circle of affiliates does not give readers any comprehensive sense of the Orientalist imaginary in which Goethe moves for decades before formulating the idea of world literature. The aforementioned conversation between Goethe and Eckermann follows the publication of *West-östlicher Divan* in 1815 and precedes that of *Chinesisch-deutschen Jahres- und Tageszeiten* in 1830. Typical of traditional humanistic focus on individual perspectives, Damrosch’s book presents only a small translational grid, omitting Goethe’s long fascination with the Orient. As *WorldLiterature@UCLA* makes clear, it is this curiosity that paves the way to his idea of world literature.

The essay is divided into three parts. The first section begins by outlining further the scholarship on the basis of which *WorldLiterature@UCLA* is built. It sheds light on the reasons why a collaborative digital humanities project is productive for studying and teaching world literature. Since one of the ongoing challenges for current digital humanities scholarship has to do with contributing effectively to larger conversations among humanists, this part specifies how *WorldLiterature@UCLA* builds upon what they have published on the topic of world literature to track social relations and ideational movements around Goethe. The second section offers a set of big data-driven visualizations based on distant reading to complement what scholars of world literature have outlined in close reading. These graphs were developed in collaborative experiments that included marking primary documents, generating commentaries, collecting and curating data, creating visualizations, and publishing findings. These two discussions provide readers with explanations of the ways in which *WorldLiterature@UCLA* engages in discipline-specific studies alongside interdisciplinary analyses. The third section presents a deliberately open-ended reflection on the project in progress.

What Chinese Novel?

Daniel Purdy has recently explained that “Goethe’s late reflections on literature, the world’s and his own,” depart radically from earlier rejections of late eighteenth-century chinoiserie and its fake imitations—or better, mistranslations (Purdy 43). What counts as essentially Chinese reverts to Orientalist images previously found in “the eighteenth-century salon” (44). Goldfish in ponds, enlightened emperors, chirping birds on trees, and the moon are offered again as iconic “descriptions of nature” and as universally common representations of the inner world (44). It also differs from the politically motivated and morally judgmental representation of China by Jesuit missionaries during the seventeenth century. From Purdy’s perspective, this significant shift in attitude toward the Orient, in general, and toward China, in particular, has less to do with a belated individual Enlightenment than with Goethe’s desire for escape from political crisis in contemporary Europe. As Purdy writes, Goethe’s decision to study Chinese culture comes “in 1813,

that exposes, calls to attention, its made-ness—and by extension, the constructed-ness of knowledge, its interpretative dimensions. This will orchestrate, at least a bit, the shift from conceptions of interface as things and entities to that of an event-space of interpretative activity” (Drucker 41).

shortly after the Battle of Leipzig,” when Napoleon is ultimately defeated (53). Walter Veit concurs with this timeline when he claims that “Goethe’s turn toward the Orient” constitutes “a response to the political, social, and intellectual turmoil in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars” (165).⁶

However, this political motivation does not suffice to explain why Goethe considers the Chinese novel a representation of world literature. For him, the universal measure of poetry still belongs to classical antiquity. To be more precise, key to Goethe’s thinking is the fact that he reads the novel in translation. It is Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat’s French translation of *Iu-kiao-li*, or *Two Fair Cousins*. Rémusat occupied the first chair of Sinology at the Collège de France and he was closely allied with Silvestre de Sacy, the most influential Orientalist at the time and one of the principal subjects in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Published in 1826, Rémusat’s translation circulated widely across Europe, having an immense impact on contemporary imagination of Chinese culture, literature, and language, including Goethe’s. Although the text was considered hardly canonical in the country of its origin, Rémusat’s “analysis of the similarities between Chinese and European literature” impressed Goethe so much that he formulated his idea of world literature on its basis (Purdy 57). In other words, Goethe believed that the Chinese novel was similar to his own *Hermann und Dorothea* and to any of Samuel Richardson’s novels, but this was because its foreignness had undergone familiarization in Rémusat’s manipulation.

Purdy and Veit offer important clues to assessing Goethe’s intellectual indebtedness to Orientalism, but they enumerate only a small number of works that influence Goethe’s imagination of world literature. Also missing from their examination is the intricate network of scholars, travelers, and translators whose negotiation between the West and the Rest provides Goethe with an essential backdrop against which he discusses with Eckermann Rémusat’s translation of the Chinese novel. Purdy does not consult with Wolfgang Bauer whose work offers a valuable list of other translations through which Goethe learns about China; nor does Purdy cite Günter Debon who has long identified Rémusat’s French translation as the Chinese novel. Debon himself points out the misidentification of this novel in previous Goethe scholarship (56-58).⁷

In light of such gaps, errors, and repetitions, Aamir Mufti is right to say that “the question of Orientalism” has been given short shrift in contemporary scholarship on world literature, although Said’s work constitutes “a sort of foundational text for concern with cultural relations on a planetary scale” (458). Mufti makes this poignant remark while referring to Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*. This book, Mufti argues, outlines the long tripartite history of European literary landscape where “non-Western traditions of writing” only appear in the latest post-World War II era with decolonization (460). If Damrosch, Purdy, and Veit neglect to consider the large network of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Orientalists in their investigation of world literature, Casanova goes a step further by effacing “the deep encounter” between cultures, languages, and literatures in the age of empires (461).

⁶ By contrast, Wolfgang Bauer locates Goethe’s change in attitude toward Chinese culture in 1798. At this time, Goethe read Erasmus Francisci’s description of the discussion between the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci and a neo-Confucian monk, and Schiller received several letters from Goethe about this reading (178).

⁷ The importance of this scholarly networking is especially apparent when scholars continue to refer to wrong texts. For example, Chunjie Zhang refers to Debon’s work, but she erroneously names *Hao Qiu Zhuan* as the text in question (Zhang 26).

With this succinct overview, we are not proposing that scholars read more widely. As Franco Moretti suggests, we can always read more. However, reading more in the same manner does not necessarily deepen our understanding of what world literature is in any particular context. It seems more productive to create a critical interface design that allows literary scholars to interrogate questions of affiliation, influence, and authorship, the politics and poetics of translation, as well as tensions between national communities in opposition to homogenizing globalizations. If the challenge posed by world literature is neither to read every literary work on earth nor to vet a global literary canon, but consists above all in generating a mode of analysis that takes into consideration colonially inflected histories of world literature before Goethe, we need to ask how digital tools might help us pursue this study in multilayered, interdisciplinary, and translational terms. The goal is not to be comprehensive in networking originals and copies as exemplars of world literature, although digital technology tempts us to entertain this mad dream. The focus needs to rest on establishing critical linkages—dominant, missing, and neglected—between clusters of colonial agents, European writers, non-European thinkers, along with their go-betweens. *WorldLiterature@UCLA* is modeled as a series of multimodal experiments in building and analyzing such relations.

Building Goethe’s World through Close and Distant Reading

To begin illustrating Goethe’s deep location in Orientalism, the first experiment has created with [Gephi](#) a social network of writers and thinkers who are associated with the preeminent author in scholarly research. This association begins with a careful examination of the relationship between Goethe, Eckermann, and Rémusat and proceeds to include targeted searches for other individuals in online databases such as [JSTOR](#), the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), [Oxford Music Online](#), and [Projekt Gutenberg](#). The information is collected as a stored dataset on the [project website](#), and descriptions of variously color-coded clusters within the network are offered alongside graphic illustrations (see Figure 2). The clusters stand for “strong”—that is, documented—affiliations based on scholarly investigations.

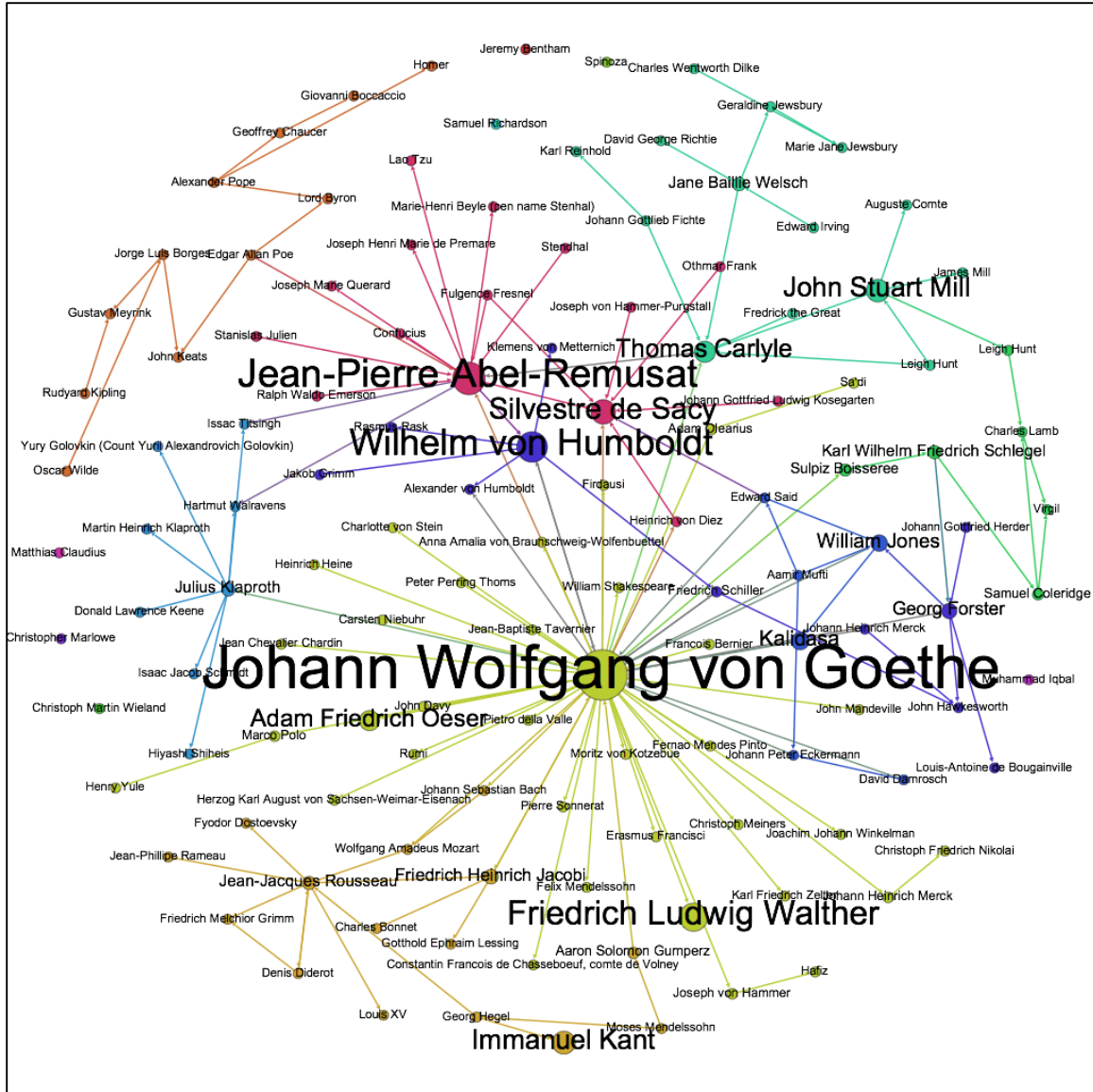


Figure 2: Goethe's intellectual network across time and space.

The graph above is the work of faculty research and student collaboration, and it represents Goethe's intellectual network consisting of 130 writers, scholars, explorers, and politicians. It includes, among others, Thomas Carlyle, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Immanuel Kant, Julius Klaproth, John Stuart Mill, Silvestre de Sacy, and Friedrich Ludwig Walther. Instead of concentrating on contemporaries only, the network illustrates, without striving to be exhaustive, who reads whose work and who communicates with whom. The difference between these communications is not apparent, but the accompanying textual description of historical encounters and intellectual legacies makes it clear.

Figure 3 is a 3-D representation with Gephi of the same intellectual network, but it has been complemented with the information collected from Said's *Orientalism*. In response to Mufti's astute remark that this work ought to play a more significant role in the study of world literature, the graph highlights the brokers whose work is important for understanding Goethe's network, as well as Said's investigation of Orientalism. Examples

include Rémusat, William Jones, and Wilhelm von Humboldt. As the visualization suggests, there are many well-understood and lesser known connections between Goethe and Said. The next iteration of this analysis would be to examine these linkages in greater detail.

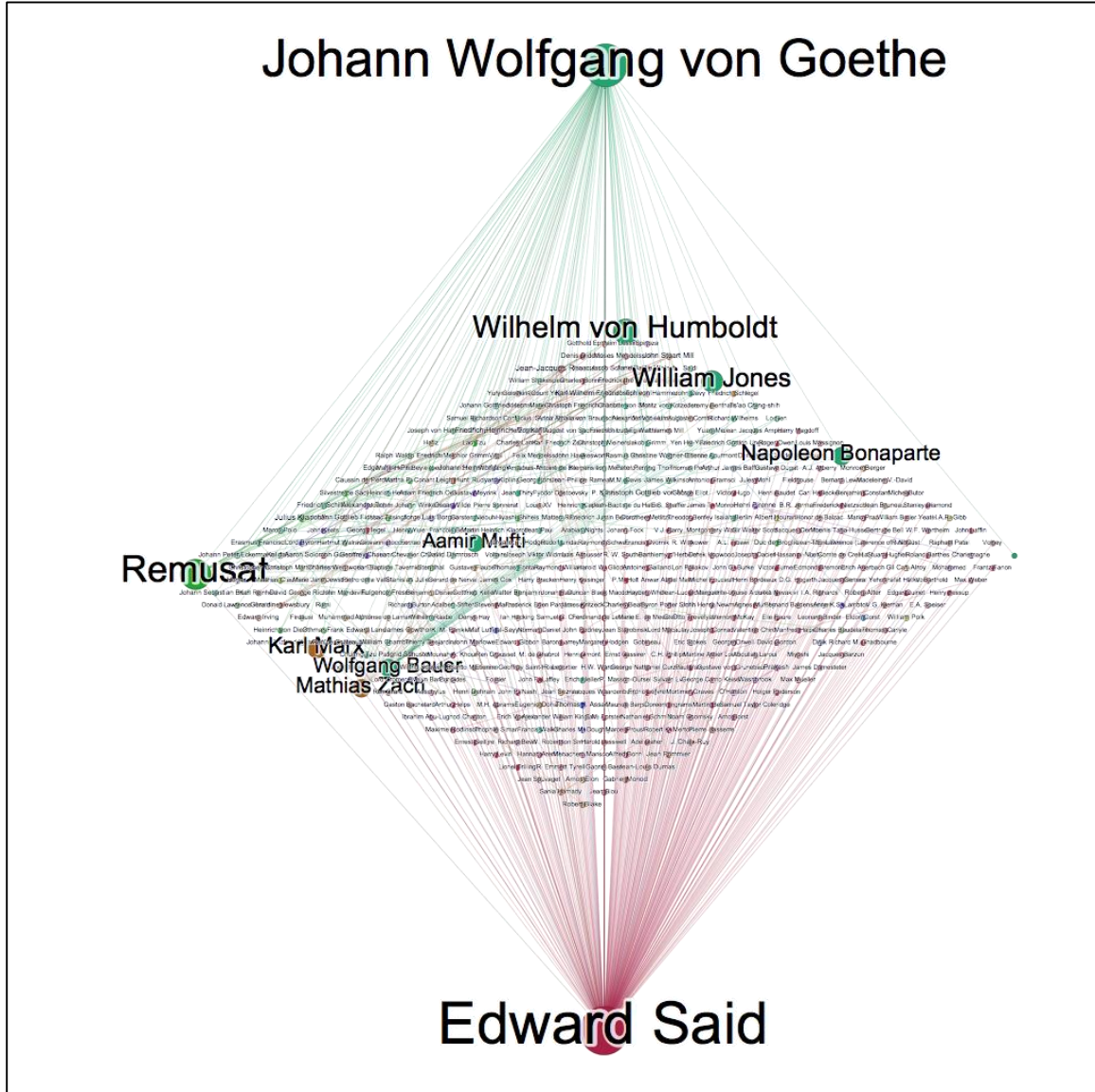


Figure 3: A 3-D representation of social networks between Goethe and Said.

If we follow Damrosch’s definition of world literature, then *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* qualifies as Goethe’s first exemplar thereof. For upon publication the *Briefroman* engendered “Werther Fieber” in many parts of Europe and, later, elsewhere around the globe. To explore this global phenomenon, the scholarly team has focused on tracking *Werther* in translation—that is, translation in the double sense of translocation (*Werther* moving away from Germany) and transformation (*Werther* being adapted to new cultural and linguistic practices outside of the German-speaking world). The process begins by collecting the names of translators and identifying the years and places of publication, the

publishers, as well as the titles in translation. It also entails compiling the data, all the while eliminating redundancy and ensuring proper schema. The following map is an illustration of the places where Goethe's novel has appeared since its original publication in Leipzig (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Locations where *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* has been published over time.

Retrieved from [HathiTrust](#) and [WorldCat](#), the information represented on this map includes some 320 translations around the globe. Each point represents a location where *Werther* has been published. In many of the highlighted cities, multiple translations have appeared since the end of the eighteenth century. For example, there are at least 46 versions in Madrid and some of them are various editions from the same translator. What this visualization demands, among others, are data collection, normalization, mining, and structuralization for humanities research. The process also requires scholars and students to investigate how the novel has transformed in translation across linguistic, cultural, and national borders.

A dynamic version of the map is available on the [project website](#) and it appears with comparisons in close reading of the similarities and differences between the original and some of the translations. This combination of close reading and distant reading is further enhanced by the following examination of temporal trends in the translation of *Werther* (see Figure 5). It shows these trends across centuries divided into different regions of the world. On the basis of this graph, scholars and students are able to raise interesting questions about possible causes for a significant decrease or increase in publication, questions that demand cultural interpretation, literary analysis, and historical thinking.

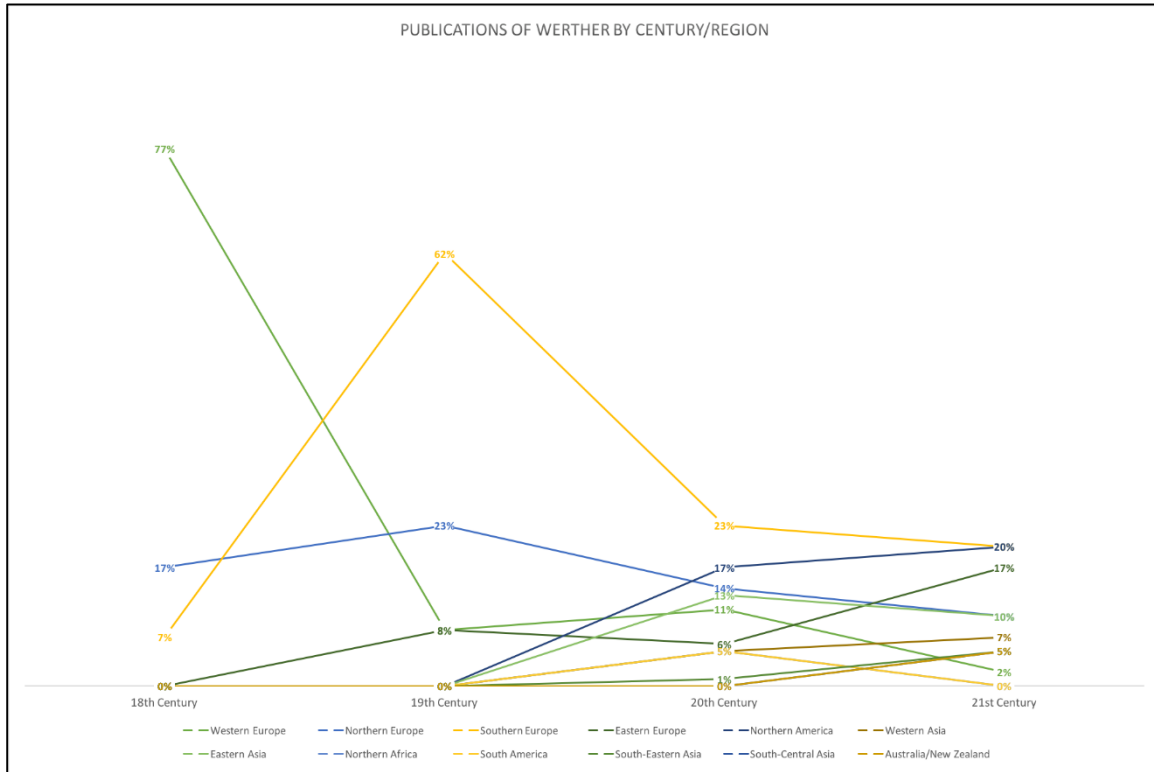


Figure 5: Percentage of *Werther* publications over time with respect to geographic location.

Open Conclusion

WorldLiterature@UCLA adapts social network theory, in general, and Gephi, in particular, to examine the concept of world literature while moving between disciplinary scholarships and multimodal practices of knowledge production. Close reading and distant reading, verbal expression and visual information processing, subject-dependent interpretation and fact-based data collection converge in a series of verbal and visual experiments focusing on multilayered and relational representations of cultural exchange. The network graphs serve as collectively produced representations of information about world literature, and the textual descriptions that accompany them address how these visualizations make Goethe’s idea of world literature more concrete even at a large scale. Instead of embodying a fixed or empirically driven archive of social relations and literary connections, *WorldLiterature@UCLA* hosts a dynamic database of Goethe’s idea of world literature with the aim to establish a macroscopic infrastructure for digital humanities research and teaching.⁸

The scholarly team has built these networks on the basis of big data, alongside detailed examinations of Goethe’s life and letters. In these multimodal inquiries into the concept of world literature, Goethe’s work appears to move across cultural, national, and linguistic

⁸ By “macroscopic” we mean, as Katy Börner explains, a structure of systems that enables scholars and students to “‘synthesize’ the related elements” while hypothesizing critical uses of computer-generated network analysis alongside scholarly publications, online databases, graphic displays, and tabular metadata (Börner 60).

boundaries. Its travel around the globe in translation is tracked at the intersection of close reading and distant reading. The result is a productive methodology that brings together conventional humanistic interpretations and digital technologies. It also underlines the “fraught and complex” nature of working on, with or through a database in digital humanities scholarship (McPherson 485). By maintaining a productive coexistence between faculty research and student collaboration, applied technology and cultural interpretation, digital literacy and German language proficiency, *WorldLiterature@UCLA* offers a critical and increasingly complex platform for exploring questions of world literature with Goethe’s life and letters.

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