

Remapping World Literature

David Damrosch
2023 Balzan Prize for World Literature

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The plan is to bring together a group of approximately ten graduate students and postdoctoral fellows each summer for five years (i.e., fifty participants in all) to attend a session of the Institute for World Literature as the members of the year's Balzan Colloquium. There they will develop their work on a common topic in world literary studies, for publication in journal and then book form. Under the overall rubric "Remapping World Literature," each year's Balzan Colloquium will have a specific topic, as described below. The focus will be on researchers from countries whose literatures have been understudied internationally, and the program will enable the participants to build connections and collaborations extending beyond their initial participation and publications.

The framework for this proposal is the Institute for World Literature, now entering its fourteenth year. Working with an international board of advisers, David Damrosch founded the Institute in order to provide training and community for graduate students, postdocs, and junior faculty who are engaged in world literary studies but whose home institutions do not provide training in the field. The home base is at Harvard, but since the intention was to reach out to the world in practice as well as in theory, the IWL meets on a rotating basis at Harvard and at other locations around the world. In addition to sessions at Harvard, meetings have been held in Beijing, Istanbul, Copenhagen, Tokyo, Lisbon, Hong Kong, and Mainz. Future sessions will be held in Nicosia in 2024 and in Reykjavik in 2025, then in Berlin (2026), at Harvard (2027), and tentatively in Seoul (2028).

By now, the program has trained some 1500 participants. At Harvard in the summer of 2023, there were 52 participants from 35 countries. The participants take seminars taught by leading scholars of world literature, attend plenary sessions with guest speakers including prominent world authors (these have included the Nobel laureates Mo Yan, Orhan Pamuk, and Herta Müller), and share their own work together in weekly colloquia. The seminars and colloquia regularly result in ongoing projects and in publications in the *Brill Journal of World Literature* and elsewhere. The *Journal of World Literature* itself, now in its eighth year, was founded on the initiative of two postdoctoral students at IWL a decade ago.

A major limitation in the Institute's work has been that affiliate universities have good funding for such programs; in addition to covering the affiliation fee, they often help their people with travel and lodging expenses. As a consequence, IWL has very few affiliates and participants from Africa or from the less developed economies in Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America, as can be seen from the map of affiliates on the IWL website:

<https://iwl.fas.harvard.edu/pages/institutional-affiliates>.

The Balzan Prize funding will enable the IWL to significantly expand its outreach during the five-year period, and in the process to develop ongoing relationships with several universities in countries not now on the IWL map. Colleagues will be asked to solicit applications from Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, Chulalongkorn in Bangkok, Eötvös Loránd in Budapest, Santiago de Chile, and the American University of Beirut, but an open call for applications from elsewhere will also be launched. In the annual application cycle, people from underrepresented areas will be invited to apply for the year's Balzan Colloquium, which the David Damrosch and the Associate Director will oversee.

Each year, the colloquium will have a common topic of general interest. In consultation with the Institute's Executive Committee and co-editors of the *Journal of World Literature*, Damrosch has developed the following topics to propose for the five years of "Remapping World Literature":

2024 (Nicosia): Multilingualisms

National literatures have often been understood in terms of a single national language, but no nation has ever been purely monolingual. Four millennia ago, the Sumerian poet-king Shulgi of Ur prided himself on his fluency in the five languages spoken at his court.

Writers since then have regularly taken account of the variety of languages and dialects around them, and they themselves have often written in more than one language. To take only a few possibilities, this colloquium will offer its participants the opportunity to explore the interactions of Arabic and French in Morocco, Ukrainian and Russian in Ukraine, Spanish and Nahuatl in Mexico, or Hindi, English, and Tamil in South India.

Meeting in divided bilingual Cyprus, the colloquium will build a comparative perspective into the variety of the world's multilingual cultures.

2025 (Reykjavik): Literature and environmental crisis

Originating in activism in Germany and the United States, the growing scholarly field of ecocriticism has to date most often focused on one or another national context. Yet writers have long understood the global nature of environmental problems. As early as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the worldwide deluge is sent by the gods in response to earthly overpopulation, and Gilgamesh has to travel far from his deforested homeland to acquire cedar trees for his temples and palaces. In her 2021 novel *The Island of Missing Trees*, the Turkish-English writer Elif Shafak uses multiple narrators – including a tree – to portray the environmental devastation of war, while writers across the global south have emphasized the lasting effects of colonialism and neocolonialism. Appropriately, this colloquium will be meeting in Iceland, which the Viking settlers had largely deforested by the thirteenth century, and which is now a center of environmental activism.

2026 (Berlin): World Literature beyond the Anglosphere

In 1952, the great German philologist Erich Auerbach presciently expressed a fear that in a postwar global monoculture “Goethe’s ideal of *Weltliteratur* would be at once realized and destroyed.” Since then, English has achieved an unparalleled status as a global lingua franca, and it is often seen as dampening the world’s linguistic and cultural variety. Yet writers in many languages continue to reach a broader public by other means. This colloquium will give its participants an opportunity to explore networks that operate outside the purview of the Anglophone world, whether in languages of global reach such as Arabic, Chinese, Portuguese, and Spanish, or through interactions among smaller literatures in “interliterary communities” (as the Slovakian comparatist Dionýz Ďurišin has called them) in many regions of the world.

2027 (Harvard): Premodernities

The emphasis of present-day world literary studies is largely on the literature of the past two centuries, even the past fifty years – just one percent of the 5,000-year history of writing. Yet writers have always engaged with their predecessors as well as with their contemporaries, and they have often drawn on ancient and premodern traditions to find new perspectives on the present. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas once remarked, “our ancestors do a lot of work for us.” Though relatively young by European standards, as Harvard nears its four hundredth anniversary it can provide an appropriate venue (and exceptional library resources) for our participants to think about the deep history of their literary traditions. The overall theme will be to explore the ways in which ideas of modernity develop in a dialectical relation to what is construed as a nation’s or region’s premodernity, with local oral or written traditions providing crucial resources for dealing with the contemporary world.

2028 (tentatively in Seoul): Imperial peripheries

Over the centuries, many writers have found themselves situated on the margins of an empire, and sometimes more than one. Peripheral countries themselves have periodically exerted imperial control over less powerful neighbors, as when Japan occupied Korea from 1910-1945. Balkan writers such as the Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić have portrayed their region at the intersection of no fewer than three empires (Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian/Soviet), while Vietnamese writers have negotiated their relations to the Chinese and then the French empires in turn. Participants from all of the regions represented in this colloquium will find intriguing commonalities together with significant differences in their writers’ responses to the imperial cultures impinging on their countries.

Once revised for publication, each year’s papers will become a special issue for the *Journal of World Literature*, of which Damrosch is one of the editors in chief, and for which the Institute is responsible for one issue per year. Brill is now regularly bringing out these special issues a year later in paperback book form. They include volumes that Damrosch has co-edited with former IWL participants on *Ultraminor World Literatures* and on *World Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, as well as volumes that the Institute’s Associate Director Delia Ungureanu has co-edited on world literature and cinema and on the legacy of the French world literature theorist Pascale Casanova.