My current book project, tentatively entitled “The World Republic of Childhood: Translation and Modern Children’s Literature, 1870-1930,” examines the crucial role of translation in developing the modern character of this transnational literary genre. One way to assess the influence of foreign children’s literature on domestic markets during the period 1870-1930 is to examine the reading experiences of children during that time. Since a reader-response case analysis is unfortunately impossible in such an historical study, my sources are instead the autobiographies, memoirs, and personal correspondence of well-known authors, translators, and other prominent intellectuals who were children at some time during this period. Given the importance of reading at home and in school in modernizing countries during this period, it is not surprising to encounter a remarkable number of references to what these cosmopolitan elites read as children and youths. Further, these recollections indicate the ubiquity of foreign translations and adaptations, and therefore how the reading experiences of such children became increasingly internationalized over the course of this turbulent period in world history.

Examining the memoirs and letters of contemporary peers in Japanese-, German-, and English-speaking countries reveals an eclectic reading experience in which adaptations and translations from foreign and domestic sources played a large part. Informed by nationalized formal schooling, domestic mass media, and personal networks, the reading choices of these young people living in very different societies were surprisingly international – whether they were aware of it or not. By gathering a wide range of recollections – notables such as Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Tanizaki Jun’ichirô (1886-1965), and Anaïs Nin (1903-1977) will be under discussion – I will broaden our understanding of translation’s effect on childhood reading at the turn of the last century, and by extension, its role in shaping ideas of (inter)nationalism in the minds of its young readers.