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1999-2005, Freie Universität Berlin, North American Cultural and Literary Studies at the John F. Kennedy Institute, Medieval and Modern German Literature and Culture, Magister Artium (M.A.); 2002-2003, visiting Fulbright graduate student in the Humanities Center at the Johns Hopkins University; 2005-present, PhD candidate, Columbia University, Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures/Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) 2008.

Dissertationsprojekt

The Voyage of the Muses: Practices of Reading and Cultural Renewal in the Mirror of the Past—Germaine de Staël, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Ralph Waldo Emerson

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed the rise of a new way of thinking about reading. Key writers – including Germaine de Staël, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Ralph Waldo Emerson – strongly influenced by the emerging field of philology and by Biblical and classical criticism, popularized the view that language can give readers access to alternative realities and modes of thinking. Through reading, and through the study of languages, they argued, people can grow aware of how other civilizations – including those in the past – experience God and conceive of beauty. According to their new view, readers should not be slaves of a text. Rather, reading represents a dialogue between reader and text, demanding imagination, empathy, and critical engagement.

My dissertation charts the rise of this new practice of reading by recovering a central transatlantic dialogue involving key thinkers in France, Germany, and the United States. Drawing upon a wealth of previously neglected sources to detail the nature of the reading practice, my project looks at the way that major figures read classical and Biblical texts. It does something more as well: It shows how this transcultural exchange about practices of reading cast a different perspective on ideas about the self, autonomy, and self-reliance. Until now, scholarship has largely associated the European-American conversations about these key concepts with idealist thinking, especially with interpretations of Immanuel Kant's critiques. My study, in contrast, by exploring notions of the individual through the lens of classical and Biblical studies, offers a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of these notions and their functions for cultural reforms on both sides of the Atlantic.

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