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A Tribute to Alfred Hornung, On the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday

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On June 13, 2013, Dr. Birgit Däwes sent me an email, explaining that she and Udo Hebel were planning to nominate Professor Dr. Alfred Horning for the Carl Bode–Norman Holmes Pearson Prize, bestowed by the American Studies Association to recognize "the outstanding achievement of an individual who has dedicated a lifetime of work to the mission and values of American studies." She asked me if I would be willing to write a letter in support of the nomination, and of course I agreed. The letter could be short—"simply one or two pages"—which was good, because the deadline was June 30th, and I was 7,500 kilometers from home, visiting my parents in Canada. But things became a bit more challenging when Birgit suggested I might want to mention—briefly—his achievements as an American studies scholar, teacher, collaborator, fundraiser, advisor, conference organizer, and leader of the global life-writing studies community.

I had two questions. First, how was I going to do justice to all of these indisputable accomplishments? And second, how was I going to fit in the additional attainments that Birgit had not listed as possibilities?

So I set to work, and compressed into two pages high praise for Alfred's pioneering and constant efforts to transform American Studies into an international endeavor. The field he encountered as a student was largely devoted to national self-definition. Over time, he became one of the most effective and enthusiastic advocates for multinational, interdisciplinary, and socially engaged approaches to reckoning with United States in itself and in the world. As a Canadian green card immigrant, a longtime resident of the US-occupied Kingdom of Hawai‘i, and a future American—granted citizenship in 2016—I shared with Alfred and many younger American studies scholars a firm belief in the value of integrating internal and external perspectives on the ongoing national experiment.

Alfred has of course made important contributions as a scholar, publishing biographies, critical studies, theoretical meditations, and field overviews—always with a diasporic or international focus. He regularly delivers keynotes and plenary presentations at the astounding number of conferences and seminars he attends, and his many academic residencies East and West, North and South have led to student exchanges, joint publications, conference cosponsorships, and institutional agreements.

But what is most remarkable about Alfred is that he has accomplished so much as an academic while devoting what appears to be the majority of his time to supporting and advancing the careers of his students and colleagues. Through his initiatives with the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies, the Mainz Research Training Group on Life Sciences and Life Writing, and of course his constant administrative support for American studies in Germany, to paraphrase Shakespeare, he is not only distinguished in himself, but the cause of distinguished work in others. Nowhere is this more apparent than his stunning tenure as the general editor for the Universitätsverlag Winter American Studies Monograph series—327 volumes as of June 2025!

What I could contribute to the round of applause summoned up for the Bode–Pearson Prize, however, was my familiarity with Alfred's international and interdisciplinary work in the field of life writing. He was already serving on the *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* editorial board when in 1999 he was one of the founders of the International Autobiography and Biography Association. In 2006, he hosted one of the early IABA conferences in Mainz; two years after that, he was instrumental in creating the regional division IABA Europe, and he was a founding editor of the *European Journal of Life Writing*. And through other hosted conferences and the Winter Verlag series, he has constantly brought life writing and American studies together as disciplines.

But I suspect that much of what I have written so far will echo many other contributors' closer familiarity with parts of Alfred's *vita*, and I also feel somewhat detached from what I have rehearsed so far—a carryover, perhaps, from 2013, when Birgit explained that because many others would be signing on to my support statement, "a general/more objective trajectory rather than a distinctly personal/individual letter" would be best. So having updated my objective statement of praise regarding his achievements, which now include being as enthiastic and productive at eighty as he no doubt was at twenty, I would like to add a few "distinctly personal" words about my association, collaboration, and friendship with Professor Dr. Hornung for more than a quarter of a century.

Although it's possible that I met Alfred at a Modern Language Association convention or some other artificial gathering, I really came to know him as part of a group of forty or so international scholars invited to a life-writing conference at Peking University. This is somewhat misleading—hundreds of Chinese scholars were there as well, who attended the daily sessions conducted entirely in English, and then their own national gathering in the middle of the night, after the distinguished visitors had either

gone to bed, or, thanks to jetlag, were wandering through the brilliantly lit gardens onsite. The plan was to create an international life-writing organization—that was why we had all been so insistently invited—and as we convened on the last day to discuss possible futures, it became clear that as always, Alfred was before and ahead of us. Because of his China contacts, he was highly familiar with the nuances of such collaborations, so when we agreed to create a loosely organized group focused on communication and conferences, he was the obvious choice to be one of the four regional representatives. (Alfred was Europe.) He has been a central figure ever since, offering sage advice, and contributing travel and support funds to other world and regional conference organizers.

Because in Beijing I volunteered to set up a listserv, I was an ex officio member of the tiny organizing group, and have been in regular communication with Alfred ever since. A quick look at my files reveals that he has been the individual or collective sender or recipient of 1,678 emails—not including the informational IABA-L postings, which also number in the thousands, and with the listing only going as far back as 2013. (My university purged the first fourteen years of our correspondence—my guess is the final total would be well over three thousand.) So Alfred has been a part of my life, and all of our lives—2,113 IABA-L subscribers as of this morning—ever since.

We met regularly at conferences—I would guess we have attended more than twenty together over the years. Always thoroughly professional, Alfred was also always ready for a good time. One of first shared experiences was heading out for an evening in Beijing with Margaretta Jolly, a small cluster of fellow international delegates, and one of our Chinese hosts. We ended up sliding around the floor of a taxi van with no seats, eventually arriving at a dance hall throbbing with several hundred Chinese revelers, uniformed military with rifles as bouncers, an Eastern European DJ, Cuban and Bulgarian dancers, a laser show, and free cigarettes distributed by young women dressed up as Batgirl.

From such moments, academic friendships grow. Over the years, Alfred visited Honolulu—for IABA and American studies conferences, and also for his sleuthing on the trail of Jack London, his biographical subject. I returned the favor at least three times—visiting Mainz for his IABA world conference, as one of the invited keynotes bringing together life writing and the German division of American studies, and as an editor and scholar invited to offer some seminars. From time to time, Alfred's students have also journeyed to the Center for Biographical Research in Honolulu, immersing themselves in the ocean of American-Pacific studies.

Alfred defies the years. He is ten years older than I am, but I started turning gray twenty years ago, and I'm still waiting for him to catch up. His endurance is legendary. He is the only person who has attended all of the IABA world conferences, and until this summer, I believe he was present at every IABA Europe conference. He has been at many IABA Americas gatherings as well, so I saw him two years ago in Poland (Europe), last year in Iceland (World), and this year in New Jersey (Americas). Age apparently cannot wither him, nor custom stale his infinite variety. Because of his

access to such impressive resources and institutional support, and because he is so unfailingly generous, his formidable status as a life-writing scholar is also matched, and even transcended, by his reputation as one of the founders and foundations of IABA. And of course, more than a decade ago, he was formally recognized as similarly significant in the field of American studies.

Alfred and I also dance—not together, perhaps, but certainly in the immediate vicinity—with our life-writing colleagues. Two evenings stand out—a marathon music celebration in São João del Rei, Brazil, and a closing banquet alfresco in Warsaw, vodka-lubricated by Pawel Rodak on a dance floor created for the occasion. I am proud to say that two of the IABA founders and senior scholars can occasionally prove there's still life in us yet.

Developed over many years and meetings, there is an ease and comfort these days to our friendship—but then, this is something Alfred extends to so many as a colleague and mentor. He is one of the few scholars I know who has managed to fully sustain his excitement and joy—although to boast for a moment, such qualities seem to appear to a higher degree among the life-writing academic community. From the beginning, many graduate students and early career scholars, some now senior figures themselves, have commented on how welcoming and generous with their time and advice more established IABA attendees often prove to be. Alfred Hornung embodies those qualities, wherever he happens to be—and not just for that moment, but to invoke an Americanism, for the long haul.

I join his many colleagues and friends in congratulating him on his eightieth birthday, I extend my best wishes to Beate and his family, and I look forward to joining him in interesting and distant places in future. And in fact, I was in a zoom session with Professor Dr. Hornung and other friends and colleagues just this morning, mapping out IABA's activities for the next five years before writing the last paragraphs of this tribute.