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To the Only "Super Global Professor of Transnational American Studies" I Know

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The famous Amherst recluse Emily Dickinson's poem "I am nobody! Who are you? / Are you – Nobody, too? / Then there's a pair of us. / Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!"[1] deeply resonates with my first encounter with Alfred Hornung, in 1988, when I had just graduated in English and French for the teaching degree, was working still as a student assistant in American studies, and was concluding my studies for teaching high school with a degree in Spanish. Of course, I was the one who felt like nobody, and he already was somebody, but it speaks to his modesty, humility, and down-to-earth attitude. Alfred's tall and impressive height, for me, was intimidating and made me feel like I was, indeed, "nobody," a feeling even enhanced by the question whether I surely was thinking about getting a PhD—I was not, but his question stimulated some thoughts in me. Would my talent, stamina, and knowledge be enough to convince Alfred that this would be something I was considering and perhaps even be good at? Some months and conversations later, I was not yet convinced I would be able to do it, but I was sure that I wanted to give it a try.

In the following years, as a PhD student, conversations were what shaped our relationship, whether about how to extend my earlier teaching degree thesis on Sylvia Plath's mirror imagery to a full-fledged doctoral dissertation on *Women's Stories of the Looking Glass: Autobiographical Reflections and Self-Representations in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde* (1996),[2] about my first teaching experience at the university, when he was sitting in on one class and I was so frightened, and later about further projects that would lead to my second book, *Migration—Miscegenation-*

Transculturation: Writing Multicultural America into the Twentieth Century (2004)[3] and to me becoming a professor of American studies at Marburg University.

These conversations have become a leitmotif in my academic life. Alfred had brought postmodernism[4] to Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz, in Germany, and not only that, he brought postmodern writers to our university, Maxine Hong Kingston, Raymond Federman, Ronald Sukenick, and others; we discussed their publications in class, in conversations among us, and, eventually, with the writers themselves. I, still a "nobody" in 1990, thought that this was the world of academia that I wanted to be a part of, explore further, and, if possible, also enrich with my work.

Apart from opening up the many facets of academic life to me, Alfred also showed me how to manage critical academic situations, already related to identity politics in the early 1990s. Reading a paper on Audre Lorde's poetry, as part of my dissertation project, at the Postgraduate Forum of the German Association for American Studies, in 1992 in Berlin, I was asked how I, as a white heterosexual woman, could dare speak about an African American lesbian woman poet. I was flabbergasted and thought "Why not?" After all, I was not pretending I understood what Lorde had gone through or that I had the same experiences but was simply analyzing her poetry. Alfred's rejoinder to the critic was simple and to the point: "If this is true, then we can only talk about ourselves, and maybe not even that."

Our conversations became political; was this confrontational situation an early example of political correctness or simply taken to an extreme? Could I, as a white German woman, not discuss the work of any African American writer, or by that logic, any US-American writer's work because I did not share the same national, ethnic, and gender background? The answer was, yes, I could do it but I would have to be aware of the implications of my analysis. Alfred brought volumes of women's poetry from his trips to the United States to Mainz, which helped me broaden my understanding of the field. Even more so, he brought feminism that no one had heard of before to our classrooms and the department. Feminism was political, and it became so in our university. Through Alfred, I learned of Gayatri Spivak and Carolyn Heilbrun, and actually met both; through him, I read Annette Kolodny's work for the first time; through him, I understood that men could very well be feminists as well.

My sojourns at Columbia University (1990–91; 1998–99), while still being a graduate student and later working on my habilitation, gradually moving out of the "nobody" sphere, opened up a whole new world of academia for me. The late Robert Ferguson, the comparatist Carole Slade, the Shakespeare and British studies expert David Kastan, the literary and medical studies veteran Steven Marcus, the American studies and African American studies scholars Andrew Delbanco and Jack Salzman respectively, and many others, became real to me, approachable, and were critically reacting to my work in conversations. My time at Columbia, even despite academic fights within the department, offered a decisive moment in my academic life, including meeting the playwright and stage director Robert Wilson, the poet Kenneth Koch, the poet, essayist, and feminist Adrienne Rich, the poet Nikki Giovanni, and many others.

Writers and scholars became real people, not just characters on paper. Columbia University was a new academic world, full of contradictions, opportunities, and academic potential that I had not seen before. Alfred was the mediator who grounded me, offered support, and a job after my return.

In addition to the arts of conversation, of networking, and of supporting emerging scholars, Alfred also taught me how to teach even in difficult circumstances. I learned that even if you are not best prepared for a class as a teacher, you can still successfully teach the class, not an ideal situation but one that we all know in academia because of the rise of administrative and scholarly obligations. You do not pretend you know more than you do but you manage to invest in the right moment to show what you know. And if you cannot answer a student's question, you either promise you will answer it next time or you pose a counterquestion. Here, too, the key is conversation; you ask about the relevance of what the class is doing; you ask about personal connections to the topic; you make the topic relevant in larger sociopolitical and personal contexts.

Alfred taught me a lot, not just about American studies but also about what it means to be a teacher, scholar, and colleague. As a teacher and scholar, he would not only teach new topics every semester but would also connect them to his own research interests. Teaching and research have never been separate areas of his work but have always been intimately connected; that is, he has always been living American studies. Even more so, I soon understood that what we do in American studies has much to do with the contemporary world and even more so with contemporary politics. If American studies is about the United States and all of its entanglements, then it is also about us, about what we do in the classroom, what we research, and how we understand our own position in the world. As a colleague, Alfred is always ready to serve as a second reader, as an evaluator for new study programs, and as a member of search committees.

Last but not least, Alfred knows how to use words powerfully, not just in his publications. His presence in meetings, on committees, and in general audiences is felt immediately, and it is hard not to be convinced by what he has to say. In this way, he has managed to found quite a number of academic organizations, has edited the journal *Amerikastudien/American Studies* (*Amst*) and its accompanying monograph series for decades, and has shown me—and others—what transnational American studies is and how it works. From *Amst*'s first European issue on reactions to 9/11 to bringing to life Atlantic studies to extending to global studies[5] and reaching out to China, Japan, Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand, Alfred has significantly expanded the scope of American studies, has always been open to new approaches in the field, and has become the embodiment of life with and in American studies. He has taught generations of students, colleagues, and friends critical thinking, openness to and in dialog, stamina and courage, knowledge and wisdom, interdisciplinarity and transnationality, ultimately constantly crossing borders to "new frontiers," to use John F. Kennedy's phrase, and has shown that they are right at the heart of American

studies. Having been Alfred's student, assistant, colleague, and friend over the many years of our acquaintance has made me realize that the early volume *Autobiographie & Avant-Garde*, published in 1992,[6] was groundbreaking not only in bringing together autobiography studies (in English and French), postmodernism, and ethnic and gender studies, but was also avant-garde in its direction toward the future; it was future studies long before this field even existed; and it was joined by innovative analyses of life writing[7] in theory and praxis. As a volume dedicated to him was rightfully entitled, Alfred has always been *Living American Studies* (2011).[8]

Had Emily Dickinson worked in American studies and had known Alfred, what would she have said to him? Certainly not, "Are you nobody, too?" but perhaps rather "Publication is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man"[9] or even more, "Wild Nights—Wild Nights! / Were I with thee / Wild Nights should be / Our luxury!" [10] [11] She would have known that barely three pages can never do justice to the entirety of life, work, and impact of such an eminent scholar. Alfred, you really are—in all facets—the "Super Global Professor."[12]

Notes

1 Emily Dickinson, "I am Nobody!" in *All Poetry*, 1891, 1999, https://allpoetry.com/I'm-nobody!-Who-are-you-

2 Carmen Birkle, *Women's Stories of the Looking Glass: Autobiographical Reflections and Self-Representations in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde* (Fink, 1996).

3 Carmen Birkle, *Migration—Miscegenation—Transculturation: Writing Multicultural America into the Twentieth Century* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004).

4 See his book series on postmodernism, initiated together with Gerhard Hoffmann.

5 See his special issue on *Global Fictions* (2002) (Alfred Hornung and Rüdiger Kunow, *Global Fictions*, Special Issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 47, no. 2 [2002]); and his essays on "ChinAmerica" (2016) (Alfred Hornung, "ChinAmerica: Global Affairs and Planetary Consciousness," in *American Studies as Transnational Practice: Turning Towards the Transpacific,* ed. Yuan Shu and Donald E. Pease, 340–64 [Dartmouth College Press, 2016]); and "Chinese Antecedents of Life Writing" (2025) (Alfred Hornung, "Chinese Antecedents of Life Writing and the Western Genre," *The Routledge Companion to Global Comparative Literature*, ed. Zhang Longxi and Omid Azadibougar, 295–311 [Routledge, 2025]).

6 To be followed by the two volumes on *Postcolonialism and Autobiography* (1999) (Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe, eds., *Postcolonialisme & Autobiographie: Albert Memmi, Assia Djebar, Daniel Maximin* [Rodopi, 1999]; and Alfred Hornung

and Ernstpeter Ruhe, eds. *Postcolonialism and Autobiography: Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, Opal Palmer Adisa* [Rodopi, 1999]).

[7] See, for example, his two impressive collections on *Autobiography and Mediation* (Alfred Hornung, ed., *Autobiography and Mediation* [Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009]) and on *American Lives* (Alfred Hornung, ed., *American Lives* [Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013], as well as his essay on the foundation of the journal *a/b: Auto/Biography* (Alfred Hornung, "Participating in the International Formation of The Autobiography Society and Its Flagship Journal." *a|b: Auto|Biography Studies* 40, no. 2 (2025): 365–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2025.2488581

[8] Mita Banerjee, Carmen Birkle, Bärbel Höttges, Manfred Siebald, and Nicole Waller, eds., *Living American Studies* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011).

[9] Emily Dickinson, "Publication—is the Auction," in *Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2: *Realism to the Present*, ed. George McMichael (1974, Macmillan, 1980), 170.

[10] Emily Dickinson, "Wild Nights—Wild Nights!" 1861, in *Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2: *Realism to the Present*, ed. George McMichael (1974. Macmillan, 1980), 155.

[11] Alfred Hornung, "Lust und Verlust in den Gedichten von Edgar Allan Poe und Emily Dickinson," *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* 31 (1990): 179–97.

[12] Keio University in Tokyo awarded Alfred Hornung this honor in 2019.

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