UC Santa Barbara
Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title
For Alfred

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2bd0f3xw

Journal
Journal of Transnational American Studies, 16(2)

Author
Hebel, Udo J.

Publication Date
2025-12-21

DOI
10.5070/T8.61742

Copyright Information
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

For Alfred

UDO J. HEBEL
University of Regensburg

AlfredHornung@80—and the request, almost Herculean in its weight, to write a short personal reflection on the significance and impact Alfred Hornung has had on my own American studies work and career. My thoughts and memories go back to another time and world. Thanksgiving 1988 at the American Studies Division of Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, thus the original institutional name long before the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies was established by Alfred Hornung. The Mainz American Studies community had gathered for the annual celebration of the time-honored American holiday with the indispensable turkey donated by a retired US Army colonel and (pre)cooked at the local US military facilities still in place full force in post-World War II and Cold War fashion not too far away in geostrategic terms from the notorious Fulda gap. I was patiently standing in line for turkey and mashed potatoes with corn, gravy, and cranberries without noticing that the person immediately behind myself, i.e., behind the recently defended doctoral candidate, was actually the recently appointed new professor and chair of American studies, Alfred Hornung. The food lines provided various and sundry opportunities for cheerful and (semi)professional small talk which, all nonhierarchical tendencies in Mainz American Studies notwithstanding, abided largely by conventional university structures and lines of status. I was therefore all the more struck by the straightforward question raised from behind me, over my shoulder, inquiring what I was doing here and what my current and future projects in American studies were about. The follow-up conversation until it was our turn for turkey and gravy developed into a most friendly albeit acute exchange about my just finished dissertation and my second book habilitation project—an exchange brimming with off-the-cuff comments by Alfred Hornung on the two quite diverse projects and culminating in his laconic remark that I better eat enough turkey to get through what was lying ahead of me. This first meeting with

Alfred Hornung—or should I better say my first encounter with Alfred's personal openness, his innovative scholarly vision and comprehensive conception of American studies, his hearty humor, and his sincere concern especially about early career scholars—should prove paradigmatic for so many of our common experiences on and off the (official and nonofficial) national and international venues of American studies throughout the decades to come. The array of anecdotes to be evoked in retrospect is marvelous, from a midnight search for red wine in Dijon, France, Greek dinners in post-GDR Potsdam, and innumerous outings in the wake of American studies conferences everywhere, all the way to soccer world championship TV viewings on a boat restaurant on the Rhine after days of national research rating meetings, a questlike visit to a 1960s remnant community on the outskirts of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and legendary late-night ASA presidential receptions for international scholars and interested others. And of course and on a genuinely serious note in regard to the true scope and purpose of Alfred's American studies ubiquity: If anybody ever takes stock of conference organizations and participations, visiting professorships, invited lectures (many of them at very short notice), planned (or spontaneous) panel chairs and panel contributions, and committee chairs, memberships, and meetings of scholarly associations or research agencies over the past half century or so, I am sure that Alfred Hornung will come out top of the list. His idea of American studies has always involved, and in a very special role-model way so, being present, being there, being social, being responsible, and being curious, critical, encouraging, inspiring, and all at the same time. Accounts of Alfred's scholarly dedication, personal energy, and social grace in and outside the lecture halls, workshop rooms, and committee meetings, which I trust all of us in this special section of *JTAS* share in abundance, are so much more than nostalgic academic lore or personal reminiscing in view of decades borne back ceaselessly into the past. They are rather fully indicative of his very understanding of American studies and of his passion of wholeheartedly and untiring living American studies, be it in multidisciplinary spaces and in welcoming communities across the globe or be it in more adverse and challenging circumstances facing academia close to home or in unexpected areas of the world. Alfred's way of thinking, practicing, and living American studies is best proof that American studies is so much more than just another academic discipline in the conventional and institutional sense of the term. Alfred's idea of American studies testifies to the vitalizing force of the field's agenda, politics, and trajectories and expresses the transformative power of the openness and diversity fueling American studies at its core. Alfred's seismographic sensitivity to the opportunities and chances of American studies within the larger spaces, networks, and complexities of the humanities and social sciences (and at times even beyond into the natural sciences and life sciences) has opened up interdisciplinary venues and transdisciplinary perspectives of utmost significance for the field of American studies and for its practitioners both well-established and emerging in so many corners of the world. Never would I myself have written and published an article on New Historicism in the very early 1990s if Alfred had not personally motivated me to try and do so at a

time when academically younger, nonprofessorial scholars in Germany still had very few opportunities to get published at all, not to speak of publishing on new theoretical trends with disruptive potential for supposedly sacred doctrines and allegedly proven academic schools. As longtime general editor of the journal *Amerikastudien/American Studies* and as the even longer leading voice of the editorial board of American Studies: A Monograph Series of the German Association for American Studies, he provided the major platform for young scholars to do often groundbreaking work and broke with many limitations for early career Americanists. Naturally so, Alfred has been in the eyes of the hurricanes of the theoretical turns in American studies from the last into the present millennium. The transnational whirlwind uplifting the dance floor of the 2004 ASA convention makes for the albeit massive tip of the iceberg in this respect whose transformative power and energy was to inspire and shape the work and career of so many Americanists in worlds now so much more different and so much more implicated than ever imaginable in the food lines of the Mainz Thanksgiving event of 1988. Transnational American studies would not have become what it is and certainly holds in store for the future if it had not been for Alfred's scholarly courage and often bold vision of American studies as overcoming and transcending, if need be transgressing and fighting against, boundaries and restrictions in academia and beyond. The very defining openness of American studies has been Alfred's driving force and trademark in his relentless shaping and reshaping of our scholarly endeavors along so many common routes over so long a time. So what seemed to have loomed at the opening of this short reflection as a maximum variant of mission impossible can actually towards the end be put into the most sincere reformulation, AlfredHornung@Thanx.