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Not Determined by Deadlines: A Tribute to Alfred Hornung

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"Transnational American Studies is also about
care and concern for each other and not determined by deadlines."

—Alfred Hornung in an email, 2025

This essay celebrates Alfred Hornung on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, a fitting moment to reflect not only on his extraordinary contributions to transnational American studies but on the care, generosity, and presence that have shaped the lives of so many around him, mine included.

When I read that line from Alfred's email—written in response to my request for an extension during a time of personal loss—I felt something shift. In a space where timelines and deliverables often override everything else, his words pulled me back to something deeper: the human foundations of the field we share. In one sentence, Alfred offered a clear, steady reminder: Transnational American Studies is not just a critical methodology. It is also an ethic of care. It is a way of showing up.

A Scholarship of Presence

Alfred's body of work needs little introduction. As Research Professor and a founding speaker of the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, he has shaped the field through scholarship, mentorship, and institution building. His intellectual reach stretches across continents—from Mainz to Beijing, from Sydney to Berkeley. His publications, editorial work, and leadership in

associations like MESEA and the American Studies Association have helped define transnational American studies as a global, multilingual, interdisciplinary conversation.

But it's not only what Alfred has done—it's how he's done it. His legacy doesn't rest solely in books or conferences or citations. It lives in the spaces he creates for others. In the ways he nurtures collaboration and community. In the email he sent to me, in a moment of grief, with gentleness and without hesitation.

Finding the Field from Afar

I met Alfred not long after taking my first tenure-track position—teaching American studies at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. I arrived eager, but quickly began to feel disoriented. My graduate training in the US had centered North American institutions, conferences, and publications. Once I left that orbit, I found myself floating. Cut off. I was no longer sure if the work I was doing—now from outside the United States—still counted.

Then someone invited me to a luncheon hosted by the International Committee of the American Studies Association. I showed up unsure of what I'd find. What I encountered was a group of scholars who worked across borders and disciplines, who asked questions shaped by lived dislocation and by the material conditions of doing American Studies far beyond America's shores.

That's where I met Alfred.

He welcomed me not with ceremony, but with warmth. In him, I recognized not just a respected scholar, but a model for how to live this work—how to root it in connection, curiosity, and care. Through that luncheon and the relationships that followed, I began to understand transnational American studies not just as a perspective, but as a community. A network of people thinking together, often across time zones and political systems, languages and academic traditions. A network where embodiment and affect matter just as much as theory.

This wasn't the version of the field I had trained for. It was better.

Hospitality as Method

In this community, I found people who weren't just publishing and teaching; they were living transnationally. Some moved across borders for work or love or politics. Others lived between languages. Many of us operated within academic systems that did not always recognize our presence, or value the geographies from which we worked. And yet, here we were—building something.

And Alfred stood at the center of that something. Not as a gatekeeper, but as a host. He made space at the table. He remembered names. He showed up—year after year, conference after conference, with steadiness and grace. He held a deep respect for difference, and he practiced a kind of generous listening that turned formality into familiarity.

A Night in Tbilisi

One evening in Tbilisi, Georgia, I witnessed this generosity in action—over many, many glasses of wine.

We had gathered for an American studies conference, and our host, the generous and tireless Vaso Kacharava, invited us to experience a traditional Georgian supra. For those unfamiliar: a supra is not just dinner. It is ceremony. It is cultural choreography. It is a marathon of food, storytelling, and toasts, each one delivered by a tamada, or toastmaster, and followed by a refill. Or several.

The wine flowed. The toasts grew more philosophical, then more personal, then emotional. Colleagues peeled away one by one, off to rest or prepare for morning panels. Eventually, only three of us remained: Vaso, Alfred, and me.

To be honest, I was feeling those last toasts! I raised my final glass with the kind of heroic wobble only possible at hour four of a supra. I retreated soon after, defeated by the hospitality. The next morning, I remained horizontal, revisiting my life choices.

Alfred, on the other hand, arrived early and cheerful to meet our host for sightseeing. He walked Tbilisi's old town as though the wine (and brandy) had never touched him.

That morning revealed something deeper than impressive stamina. Alfred never treated the supra as spectacle or obligation. He entered into it fully, honoring the rhythms of Georgian hospitality, listening to every toast, meeting his host's generosity with his own. Then, the next day, he showed up again.

This wasn't performative cosmopolitanism. This was presence. This was care made visible.

I still salute the man who drank me under the table—and made it to breakfast with a smile.

A Space for Voice

One of the things I've most appreciated during my time as Forward editor for the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* is the latitude Alfred has given me to write in a style that isn't strictly academic. From the beginning, he made space for an editorial voice that draws as much from journalistic clarity and cultural observation as it does from scholarly rigor.

That kind of freedom is rare in academia. The norms of legitimacy in our field often come tethered to particular stylistic conventions—language that signals seriousness, formality, discipline. But Alfred, with characteristic generosity, has allowed me to approach writing from the edges. He trusts voice. He recognizes that insight can emerge from a conversational aside or a pop cultural reference as easily as from a citation-heavy footnote (which he also has cautioned me against!). He understands that a certain kind of rigor lives not in rigidity, but in resonance.

It's thanks to Alfred that I've been able to write editorials that weave in personal reflection, political urgency, humor—and once, memorably, a Taylor Swift reference. I can't say I expected the editor-in-chief of a major academic journal to greenlight a nod to folklore, but Alfred simply read it, nodded, and moved on. He let me be "Californian," "noisy," "opinionated," "pop"—and only once or twice has he asked me to tone it down (and, to be fair, in those instances, he had a point).

In other words, he never told me I couldn't be the "Anti-Hero."

But this isn't just editorial kindness, it reflects something deeper about how Alfred imagines the field itself. Transnational American studies requires us to stretch voice across genres, registers, and audiences. It asks us to think across borders, not only geopolitical, but also rhetorical. Alfred understands that new perspectives don't always arrive in familiar forms. He knows that a scholar's locations (cultural, institutional, emotional) shape how they write. And he makes space for that.

Alfred offers the kind of editorial mentorship that amplifies voice instead of flattening it. He knows that writing from the margins—geographic, stylistic, or otherwise—can open up new ways of thinking. And he has never asked us to trade in our texture or tone in exchange for legitimacy.

He let me write like myself.

And that, too, is a form of care.

Embodied Scholarship and the Refusal of Extraction

Alfred's work—and his way of working—offers a vital model for how transnational American studies can function as an embodied and relational practice. In contrast to extractive models of academia that prioritize productivity, citation metrics, and institutional prestige, Alfred cultivates spaces where lived experience, affective affiliation, and relational accountability matter as much as scholarly output.

To speak of embodiment here is to honor the specificities of location, language, and heritage that shape how we encounter, teach, and write about "America." Transnational American studies, at its most vibrant, does not universalize its insights. It grounds them in bodies: in where scholars live and work, in what passports they carry, in what institutional structures support or constrain them. It attends to the geopolitics of knowledge production—acknowledging that where and how one speaks from matters.

This is not simply a thematic shift but an epistemological one. It echoes what Gloria Anzaldúa called "theory in the flesh"—a way of knowing that emerges from lived contradictions, bodily knowledge, and borderlands of identity and geography. It resonates with Sara Ahmed's understanding of how institutional life is shaped by affective relations and uneven distributions of comfort, power, and recognition. And it follows the diasporic trajectories that Paul Gilroy maps—where the movement of people, ideas, and memories disrupts the national frame and demands new modes of affiliation.

Alfred has long supported scholarship that emerges not just about but from these peripheries—whether geographic, linguistic, stylistic, or institutional. He recognizes that transnationalism is not simply a lens through which we view the world, but a lived condition: a position shaped by dislocation, translation, and layered belonging.

And while Alfred has succeeded by every traditional academic measure—his publishing record, editorial leadership, and institutional impact are formidable—his legacy is not defined by volume. It is defined by presence. He refuses the scarcity logics of academic time. He does not demand productivity at the expense of personhood. He makes space for delay, for grief, for creativity. He sends kind replies to vulnerable emails. He meets deadlines with flexibility, not punishment. These are not inefficiencies. They are practices of care.

To work with Alfred is to experience a different kind of academic temporality—one not governed by urgency or extraction, but by attention, trust, and reciprocity. A transnationalism not only theorized, but lived.

One More Toast

So I raise one more toast to Alfred Hornung.

To the scholar who reminded me, in a difficult hour, that what we do is human work.
To the tamada of the heart, who honors every invitation—whether to speak, to listen, or to walk the city at dawn.
To the builder of bridges, the lifter of glasses, the first to welcome and the last to leave the table.
To the man who drank me under the table and still woke up early to say thank you.

And on this milestone birthday, I raise that toast with even more joy: to your eighty years of wisdom, wit, and unwavering presence—may we all age so generously.