UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

American Eagles and Tibetan Vultures

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/364789zk

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 16(2)

Author

Gernalzick, Nadja

Publication Date

2025-12-21

DOI

10.5070/T8.61854

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

American Eagles and Tibetan Vultures

NADJA GERNALZICK
Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

Once in the early 1990s, Alfred held in conversation that "American studies is Comparative Literature." What he called "mainstream American studies" still loomed large, and so, eventually, he cofounded transnational American studies. His creative solutions to disciplinary limitations in sciences came from a researcher's spirit and determination. He pragmatically pursued reform rather than revolution, however, investing a great amount of self-restraint and diplomacy in overcoming discursive borders in academe. When he cofounded transnational American studies, he was also seeking, to my mind, for a way to recognize that the reverse statement "Comparative Literature is American studies" cannot hold true.

At the same time that he pursues change in the name of freedom of the sciences, his actions are an example of pragmatism in the interest of the well-being of individual researchers. He attends with passion and innovation to semantic and institutional structures that organize and reorganize groups but also defends and takes the side of those individuals who do not fit established groups. In his Mainz University lectures for graduate students in the early 1990s, on celebrated American writers, he always acknowledged the writers' status as artists but also the social repression that makes difference felt for the individual(ist), or the intersectional violence resulting from racialization, classism, sexism, or homophobia. Alfred regularly described intersectionality before the term was in use.

In teaching American literary history, Alfred supports understanding for the chosen lifestyles of artists, whether writers of the romantic era, naturalists, high modernists, the Beats, or postmodernists. His approach reminds of a critical but caring biographer. As an Americanist, Alfred told of his very own experience of the United States on the proverbial road trip in the South and on Route 66 that he took when he

was a young academic, in companionship with a friend whose eyesight was impaired. His autobiographical story evoked for me two visionaries conversing in the car, and I imagined contemplating the road beyond the windshield extending to the horizon. Such cinema made me feel safe in this world.

Alfred's best seminars are the ones in which he seems unprepared or comes into the room, filled with expectant students, on a note of excusing his lateness. From our initial discussion of questions on the assigned reading, he would launch into programmatic statements or mini-lectures that coherently abstracted from immediate textual detail, connected to wider transcultural and historical developments, and helped relate our thinking to current research movements and critical terminology. Such sessions turned studying for a degree into learning for life. Any conversation with Alfred has this potential, I later understood.

Once, while boarding a plane, I happened on Alfred, seated before his laptop in one of the rows. He was completing, he said, the final pages of his biography of Jack London and was relieved to find the time for writing while in the air. Many of his publications and talks, I believe, have this kind of strong above-the-clouds component—an undisturbed view, wide open to abstraction or even meditation. He is a formidable world traveler, an academic cosmopolitan, between West and East, North and South, always between here and there.

In one of his talks from the 2010s, Alfred combined discussion of auto/biography theory with an autobiographical reflection on attending a sky burial while traveling in Tibet. He had recently returned from the trip and was coming to terms with what he had experienced. Vultures devoured the several dead human bodies laid out and presented to them on the mountain slope. He felt most moved that the animals preferred and first attended to the body of a young boy, rather than bodies more aged. Living eternity has a taste, we agreed.

May you always have a good flight!