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Splashes, Happenings, and Journeys: Learning with Alfred Hornung

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It began with a splash of paint.

In Alfred Hornung's American Avant-Garde seminar, my presentation on Jackson Pollock and abstract expressionism didn't stay confined to words and slides. Alfred Hornung didn't just permit a creative detour—he encouraged it. Soon, the class and I stood around a white blanket-turned-canvas, dripping and flinging color in arcs and splatters. It was messy. It was joyful. It was learning as performance.

And then came the Happening.

My project partner and I decided to channel Allan Kaprow's notion that art should break free from galleries and blend into the rhythms—and disconnections—of daily life. We gathered a small troupe of amateur actors and set them loose in the seminar room. They wandered through the space, speaking into cell phones, tapping away on laptops, sending faxes, moving without seeing each other. They were together in one room yet isolated in their own technological bubbles. Alfred, our unsuspecting guest of honor, walked into this choreographed chaos without knowing what to expect—and immediately became part of it. True to Kaprow's ethos, there was no fixed script, only an unfolding moment. The boundaries between performer and audience dissolved. Alfred Hornung responded, improvised, and engaged, embodying exactly the playful openness we were trying to explore. We recorded the whole event, but what stays with me is not the footage—it's the fact that my professor, a scholar of such stature, would step so willingly into our experiment and simply *play*.

In his seminar Asian American Literature and Intercultural America, Alfred Hornung opened other doors. Through writers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Zora Neale Hurston, I encountered voices that resonated across cultures and generations. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) weaves autobiography with Chinese folktales, centering identity, memory, and narrative hybridity.[1] Hurston's *Their Eyes Were*

Watching God (1937), a classic of the Harlem Renaissance, traces a woman's journey to selfhood in early twentieth-century Florida.[2] These seminars introduced me to narratives that became my constant companions and, eventually, the foundation of my Master's thesis on Filipino American literature. They also gave me a framework for thinking about identity as layered, intersecting, and dynamic—a framework that continues to shape my work today.

Beyond the classroom, I had the privilege of working with Alfred Hornung as a student assistant, both at his chair and during his time as dean. Those years gave me a close-up view of his generosity as a mentor and his capacity to treat students as emerging colleagues. His guidance extended far beyond academic assignments.

When I began my "Wurzelreise," tracing my roots and my place between cultures, Alfred didn't just nod supportively; he actively encouraged it and opened doors. He sent me to Santa Fe, New Mexico, as a Bread Loaf School of English summer student. There, in the American Southwest, I discovered the stark beauty of Georgia O'Keeffe's art, the warmth of adobe architecture, the richness of Native American cultures, and the enduring Spanish influences—echoes of which I recognized from the Philippines. Later, in New Zealand, I worked as a teaching and research assistant in the Department of Languages and Cultures at Otago University and, among other things, immersed myself in Māori traditions.

Those experiences were more than study trips. They were affirmations: that my history mattered, that my questions were worth pursuing, that my place in academia, however unconventional, was valid.

Today, my path winds through scientific management. I work with natural scientists as a humanist, heading the communications and events office. It's not the expected trajectory for an American studies graduate, but the skills Alfred Hornung cultivated in me—curiosity, interdisciplinary thinking, and the courage to blur boundaries—make it feel like a natural continuation. I still write about intercultural experiences, particularly as a second-generation Filipino in Germany. I serve on the board of the philippinenbüro e.V. on a voluntary basis and am an active member of the Halo Halo network, a network of second-generation Filipinos in the German-speaking diaspora. The line from Alfred Hornung's seminars to my current work isn't straight—it loops and splashes and doubles back—but it's visible in every step.

What Alfred Hornung gave me cannot be summed up in a list of lectures attended or books read. He modeled a way of engaging with the world—as a scholar, as a mentor, as a human being—that made it possible for me to connect my academic interests to my heritage, my creativity to my scholarship, and my professional work to my personal convictions.

If his classes had a thesis, it might be this: Learning is a living thing. It can be painted, performed, traveled, and inhabited. And so I carry that with me—in words, in work, in community—like a white canvas that is never quite finished, still open to the next splash of color.

Notes

[1] Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

[2] Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (University of Illinois Press, 1991).

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