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Contribution for Alfred Hornung's Eightieth Birthday

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Alfred Hornung is a giant in German American studies. Having a mentor of such proportions can be intimidating at times, and I am grateful that his impressive reputation as a scholar of transnational American studies and life writing is matched by his generosity and care for his mentees. Giants often have a reputation of living in inaccessible places—far away mountains, caves, or (ivory) towers. Alfred, however, is quite the opposite: rather than towering over people, he lifts them up and invites them in. He has a gift for bringing together people from around the world to exchange ideas and create strong relationships. This is at the core of his transformative work in the field of transnational American studies, which he has shaped through many edited volumes, handbooks, articles, conferences, and of course *JTAS.* It has also had a profound impact on me during my time in Mainz and beyond, as he has opened my mind to new ways of thinking and has gifted me with opportunities to make life-changing connections with people in Germany and the United States.

I came to Mainz as an undergraduate student by lucky accident. I had initially planned to get a German-French double degree in law, and I never regretted abandoning this plan quickly as I embraced my dream to study and teach American literature and culture instead. I was fortunate to encounter Prof. Alfred Hornung in lectures and thought-provoking seminars and to benefit from his expertise in literary and cultural studies. I remember being struck by his sense of humor and his openness to new subjects and methodologies. He supervised my Master's thesis on deconstruction in Paul Auster and then encouraged me to study Siri Hustvedt's work in my doctoral dissertation. Steering me toward a road less travelled (academics were just beginning to discover Hustvedt at the time), this advice has made all the difference in leading me to where I am today.

Part of Alfred's vision of intercultural exchange and connection manifests in Johannes Gutenberg University's excellent direct exchange programs with American

partner universities, which he shepherded and expanded for many years. My own path demonstrates the vital impact such programs can have on students' lives. I had the good fortune to attend California State University in Sacramento in the academic year 2001/2002 and Columbia University in New York in 2005/2006. Sacramento offered me an exhilarating and fun year of study, which allowed me to take postmodern American literature and creative writing alongside tai chi and tennis classes. It speaks to Alfred's generosity that he complemented me on my strong GPA in spite of my more leisurely curricular choices. Things got more serious during my year at Columbia, where I encountered three people who continue to shape my life today. First, I had the immense privilege to meet with Siri Hustvedt. Initial interviews turned into friendship, and I remain grateful for the ways in which our conversations have impacted my academic and personal life. On campus, I had the great fortune to be Maura Spiegel's research assistant, whose guidance has been formative for my own academic career, deepening my engagement with relationality and narrative medicine. Finally, I met Eero Laine at a party in Manhattan, and the rest is (happily married) history. Without Alfred's dedication to international academic exchange and his generous support of my stay at Columbia, none of these consequential bonds would have been formed.

In his essay "*The Shaking Woman* in the Media: Life Writing and Neuroscience,"[1] Alfred Hornung highlights Siri Hustvedt's "synthesizing work"[2] and her focus on "cross-border approaches" that hold space for ambiguity and multiple perspectives. One might suggest the same about his own academic career, which has long been driven by a determination to overcome disciplinary and national boundaries, creating new fields of intellectual exchange and connection. This drive also strengthened the bonds formed in New York City, as he facilitated ongoing relationships between Siri Hustvedt, Maura Spiegel, and Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz. Thanks to his engagement, both Siri and Maura visited Mainz multiple times, enriching intellectual exchanges and shaping conversations through their unique perspectives. For instance, Siri Hustvedt's reading and plenary lecture were highlights at the German Association for American Studies's Annual Convention in Mainz in 2012, where everyone seemed to think of me as her personal assistant—there are worse things one could be mistaken for. Alfred also facilitated the conferral of an honorary doctorate on Siri Hustvedt at the Johannes Gutenberg University in 2016, which further deepened the mutual connection. Together with Prof. Dr. Mita Banerjee, co-speaker of the Research Training Group "Life Sciences, Life Writing," he strengthened ties with Maura Spiegel and Columbia's Narrative Medicine, hosting a co-taught narrative medicine workshop and the "Cultures of Medicine" conference in 2019. These relationships were indispensable to developing my own scholarly work in the field of contemporary literary studies and health humanities. With Alfred's guidance, I published the first monograph on Siri Hustvedt's work with Winter in 2014: "*I am because you are": Relationality in Siri Hustvedt's Work*,[3] and I coedited *Zones of Focused Ambiguity in Siri Hustvedt's Works* in 2016 (with Johanna Hartmann and Hubert Zapf).[4]

As a Professor of English at LaGuardia Community College in New York City, I hope to continue Alfred's legacy of transdisciplinary and transcultural thinking in one of the most diverse academic communities in the world. This legacy has especially shaped my thinking about LaGuardia's Health Humanities program, which I cofounded in 2023. The program offers a holistic approach to health education, encouraging students to gain insight into how we experience health, illness, disability, and health care through multiple disciplinary and cultural lenses.

If I may offer one last thought on Alfred's mentorship over the years, his ability to instill rigorous academic work with a sense of joy may be my personal favorite among his many gifts to his mentees. When I left his office after defending my doctoral dissertation, my parents, who had been waiting in the hallway in the hope of joining the celebration after, commented that all they heard was laughter. They seemed to have some doubts about the seriousness of the whole affair, but laughter and rigor need not be mutually exclusive when you have a mentor like Alfred Hornung. I am deeply grateful for his mentorship over the years, and I wish him all the best for his eightieth birthday.

Notes

[1] Alfred Hornung, "*The Shaking Woman* in the Media: Life Writing and Neuroscience," *Zones of Focused Ambiguity in Siri Hustvedt's Works: Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Johanna Hartmann, Christine Marks, and Hubert Zapf (De Gruyter, 2016).

[2] Hornung, "*The Shaking Woman* in the Media," 71.

[3] Christine Marks, *"I am because you are": Relationality in Siri Hustvedt's Work* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014).

[4] *Zones of Focused Ambiguity in Siri Hustvedt's Works: Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Johanna Hartmann, Christine Marks, and Hubert Zapf (De Gruyter, 2016).

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