UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

A Singular Seminar: A Lifetime of (Self-)Discovery

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4gz7s715

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 16(2)

Author

Shivam, Ahngeli

Publication Date

2025-12-21

DOI

10.5070/T8.61755

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

A Singular Seminar: A Lifetime of Academic (Self-)Discovery

AHNGELI SHIVAM
Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz
and Georgia State University

In 2016, I attended Alfred's graduate seminar Literature and Medicine. As a first-year master's student, I was both intimated and awed by his knowledge, eloquence, and thoughtful insights. Little did I know then that this class—and everything that followed—would quite literally change the course of my academic and personal life.

Among other things, Alfred's seminar encouraged us to read and discuss "literary representations and autobiographical accounts of the interrelation of literature and medicine in Western Civilization [with a] special focus … on the representation of diversity and illness in life narratives." What followed were encounters with powerful voices willing to vulnerably share their experiences with the world—from Audre Lorde to Siri Hustvedt. These journeys were persistent, personal, and overtly political in nature. Although they resonated with me, I initially regarded them as static artifacts rather than living cultural productions, a perspective shaped by the German academic system I was trained in. Nonetheless, these collected impulses eventually sparked my academic journey of self-discovery.

This first seminar offered only a glimpse of the pioneering and deeply influential disruption Alfred has brought to American studies. Through his galvanizing influence, the field has truly evolved into a transnational model. He has played a pivotal role in transforming American studies from a solely US-centric and, particularly in Germany, predominantly theoretical and impersonal discipline into one that embraces a multitude of personal perspectives. His methodological innovation of moving beyond the nation has and continues to challenge the traditional framework that views the United States as an isolated cultural and political monolith. Consequently, diaspora and the actual movement of people(s) have been emphasized alongside the narratives

these shifts have generated. Subsequently, Alfred introduced me to a variety of other works and writers who were unafraid to express themselves through their narratives.

Through his work on various forms of life narratives, Alfred has elevated the genre into a serious mode of cultural analysis and a respected lens for fostering accessibility, thereby creating a space for personal narratives that were once marginalized and silenced. By using life narratives as a means to explore transnational identities and cultural memory, Alfred enabled me to engage with media I was not only passionate about in terms of research but which also deepened my understanding of my own identity, upbringing, family history, and collective memory. Moreover, his approach to American studies—marked by intellectual curiosity and devoid of exclusionary and elitist structures—inspired me to move beyond the dominant white, male, national canon and to embrace my own voice. By decentering individual countries and viewing them as nodes in global cultural flows, I came to understand how my own histories fit within a broader matrix—and how academia and personal narrative can function as interconnected opportunities rather than a binary choice.

As editor in chief of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* and a longstanding member of various editorial boards, he has not only provided a platform for established scholars but also actively encouraged early-career researchers to share bold, transformative ideas. This challenges long-established notions of identity, politics, culture, gender, and so much more—further globalizing the field and amplifying multiethnic perspectives. Furthermore, his involvement in international programs—from China to Brazil—consistently emphasizes the importance of dialogical knowledge exchange.

Taken as a whole, his body of work reflects a powerful commitment to the ethical dimensions of scholarship—especially when engaging with marginalized subjects. He champions pluralism and heterogeneity as fundamental to of American cultural expression and as guiding principles for both research and researcher. His approach to cultural studies is not only critical, but also responsive and responsible, dedicated to dismantling power asymmetries in the production of knowledge.

Alfred's contributions to transnational American studies are too vast to fully capture. His guiding principle—to look beyond both metaphorical and physical boundaries—continues to inspire the field's evolution and underscores the interdisciplinary connections among cultures shaped by migration, colonization, and globalization. Beyond his scholarship, my academic journey has been profoundly touched by Alfred's encouragement, intellect, and kindness. He has believed in me and my abilities, inspiring me to pursue various opportunities while supporting me on my personal path. As a first-generation immigrant and academic, I have witnessed Alfred's remarkable ability to foster an accessible and empowering space for untethered growth and exploration for young researchers. In the many roles he continues to play in my life—supervisor, mentor, and editor-in-chief—I remain forever grateful for his unwavering guidance.