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Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

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Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 16(2)

Author

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Publication Date

2025-12-21

DOI

10.5070/T8.61731

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Larger than Life: Alfred Hornung

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I knew Alfred Hornung's work before I knew him. When I was beginning my journey into the world of what was then called autobiography studies, I read Alfred's work on autobiography and postmodernism. I was struck by the quality of his knowledge of critical theory, and his deep understanding of the philosophic movements which formed the background of deconstruction at the Yale School and the development of postcolonial theory and criticism. Postmodernism and poststructuralism were in fashion in Canada during the late 1980s and early 1990s, but many of the Canadian scholars writing about these ideas in literary studies were relying on secondhand accounts of the philosophical work that came from creative treatments of the subject. Along with other scholars working on autobiography, postmodernism, and poststructuralism, including Sidonie Smith, Michael Sprinkler, and Leigh Gilmore, Alfred wrote extremely well about subjectivity and its politics, and made ideas about autobiography studies and identity accessible and compelling for me. I especially remember Alfred's excellent critique of Jacques Derrida's treatment of autobiography and genre, and it was from him that I first heard about Edward Said as a life writer. I saw Said speak about Palestine in the 1980s, and Alfred's connection of life and narrative to what Said was saying in that talk about Palestine made me more fully understand Said's work as a public intellectual. The analogies Alfred was making between life, writing, and questions of power deeply influenced my own work as I began it.

In 2000, I sat next to Alfred at the IABA conference at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and talked with him about the importance of theorizing subjectivity in light of a talk we heard there. I'm going to assume that he won't remember talking with a junior scholar from Canada, but that conversation was very important to me, because

it helped me to keep on connecting philosophical work on identity with the importance of personal stories. He treated me, and my ideas, with respect then, just as he does now. I'm so grateful to him for that and I have tried to model how he collaborates with new scholars and new ideas.

I got to see how Alfred's belief in mentorship and academic community worked firsthand in 2006, when I attended the IABA conference that Alfred organized at the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz. That conference featured one of the largest gatherings of life writing scholars I had seen up to that time. What I remember about Alfred at that conference was how much fun he seemed to be having at every point, and what a genial host he was. Later on, he was an important driving force behind creating IABA Europe, the first regional chapter of IABA, which has become a vibrant part of life writing studies, with that same spirit of academic excellence, collegiality, and congeniality. It's a legacy to be proud of.

I was very fortunate to get to spend some time with Alfred when he asked me to come to Mainz and give a talk in honor of his colleague's retirement in 2015, where I got to know him better and spoke with him about life, work, and everything in between. I also spoke with many of his younger colleagues and students. All of them had stories about how Alfred had supported them and helped them to succeed, in conditions that were extremely challenging. That too, was a model for me about how to support other people in an often-competitive academic world, and how life writing scholarship has an ethics of practice that other scholars would do well to emulate.

One of the things that I respect so much about Alfred is that he is not someone whose ideas stand still. He is always interested in current ideas and approaches, and he always wants to be in dialogue about new developments in scholarship. Even when we have disagreed about something on occasion, we are academic family, and we learn from each other. Not very many scholars of Alfred's caliber and experience have that kind of curiosity and generosity. In the 2025 *a/b: auto/biography studies* fortieth anniversary issue, Alfred writes about the exciting early days of the Autobiography Society and its publication, *a/b: auto/biography studies*, and in that article it is very clear that Alfred was a field-building scholar during that time. One of the reasons why life writing is so international as a field is because Alfred participated in those early gatherings and projects, and connected scholars in Europe (and later, in Australia and China) to developments in North America. Collaborating with colleagues, Alfred edited scholarship that connected all these different places and formations together, and built the field, always focusing on developing areas of interest, such as mediation or ecology. But in that account, I also appreciated Alfred's discussion of foundational work in the field that came from Germany, including the work of Georg Misch, who I think deserves more critical attention. That, to me, sums up Alfred's contribution to life writing studies: It connects the past, the present, and the future in a spirit of generosity.

Happy birthday, Alfred! You truly are larger than life in our field. Thank you for everything and see you at the next conference.