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“interdisciplinary in the best sense of American studies”

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The editors of this section invited me to think about what Alfred Hornung’s personality and work as a scholar have meant to my own life, career, and thinking: as his student, student assistant, PhD candidate, long-time mentee, and now, eventually, his colleague and friend. A great honor, indeed! But the task is also a formidable one. For the ways in which Alfred has influenced me since our first actual conversation at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in the summer of 2001, in the context of an orientation meeting hosted by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), are manifold and profound. Alfred has been an integral part of my academic life and has accompanied all major career steps ever since that first conversation in 2001. Who knows whether I would be where I am now had it not been for his mentorship?

Which leads me to my first point: Alfred’s deep commitment to the people he has taken under his wing. Talking to me in Evanston must have somehow sparked his interest in me and my academic pursuits. After my return from the United States in 2002, he asked me to work for him as his student assistant and, a few years later, encouraged me to pursue my MA thesis and then my PhD with him. Importantly, his commitment to me did not end when I received my doctoral degree in 2010 and headed north to teach and work in Münster and Osnabrück. Quite to the contrary, Alfred has consistently made time to talk to me about life and work, to offer me his advice on career paths and choices and to give pep talks whenever I felt discouraged. What Alfred has been to me over the many years since our first meeting, I have been trying and will always try to be to those under my own mentorship, no matter which roads they decide to take.

Alfred’s passion for American studies deeply impressed me as a student enrolled in his courses. I cannot remember one single America-related topic he was not excited about. Alfred has always been enthusiastic about interacting with Americanists

from all academic career stages and places across the world and has exceled at connecting them. He has invested much energy and time in creating transnational networks of intercultural relations and has actively supported research and people that—like himself—endeavor to grasp America in its transnational dimensions: as constructed at the crossroads of cultures and across space and time. And his enthusiasm for American studies has not only affected me. When in November 2022, Alfred gave a talk in the *Current Issues in North American and Cultural Studies* Lecture Series at Bonn University about the influence of Confucius on American politics and culture, my students told me later how impressed they had been by this senior scholar who had so passionately talked about a topic they would have never guessed to be so exciting. Alfred's passion for American studies is infectious and, after so many years of working in the field, unbridled. In political times as challenging such as these, I can only hope for breath, stamina, and enthusiasm as durable and unwavering as Alfred's in order to overcome the occasional stasis and speechlessness.

What Alfred also taught me as a student early on and what shaped my later work as an Americanist was his broad conceptualization of "text." In his doctoral dissertation on the texts of the Muckraking Movement, Alfred emphasizes in the preface that "a general notion of 'text' … has the advantage of greater openness, since it is not aesthetically biased" ("ein[] allgemeine[r] Textbegriff … [hat] den Vorteil größerer Offenheit …, da er ästhetisch nicht vorbelastet ist," translation mine).[1] To move away from, as Alfred phrases it, "the common extensive notion of literature" ("dem gebräuchlichen extensiven Literaturbegriff," translation mine) was no small feat in 1978.[2] The same is true for his firm insistence on the "obvious inadequacy of a purely dichotomous separation between fiction and factography" ("[die] offensichtliche[] Unzulänglichkeit einer rein dichotomen Aufteilung in Fiktion und Faktographie," translation mine).[3] Working over many years on multiple textual forms of life writing that test the ground between fact and fiction, Alfred has continued on the paths he first charted in his dissertation. Along these paths, he instilled into us students the significance of studying a broad range of texts (particularly socially critical texts), irrespective of their aesthetic quality and academic popularity. He fostered our interest in texts that (re-)negotiated/challenged dominant conceptions of fact and fiction. And he encouraged us to let our interests roam freely and to push the limits of what we know and how we know.

A last point I would like to mention is Alfred's endorsement of projects he judges to be "interdisciplinary in the best sense of American studies" ("im besten Sinne der American Studies interdisziplinär," translation mine), as he phrased it in a reference letter that he wrote for me in 2004. When I worked on my dissertation, a social and cultural history of alcohol in the context of the American temperance movement in the Midwest, I sometimes felt a bit like an outlier: the topic as such, its historic specificity, its regional focus as well as its disciplinary location at the intersection of historical and cultural studies, with a strong dose of legal history. Alfred pushed me to pursue my interests. He told me that projects such as mine, taking down

traditional disciplinary walls, were not at the margins but right at the center of American studies. An American studies framework and approach, he emphasized, does not simply mean to historically contextualize literature but to bring into conversation multiple academic disciplines in the study of historical, cultural, and literary phenomena. His words continue to ring in my ears and have deeply influenced my work up to the present day. They serve as a continuous reminder of what drew me to American studies in the first place and what has kept me fascinated ever since: its fundamental credo of interdisciplinarity; its challenge of disciplinary boundaries and norms; its commitment to developing novel approaches that foster a more nuanced understanding of "America."

Alfred was a great teacher, supervisor, mentor to me; he has been and continues to be a wonderful colleague and friend who brightens my day and whom I still learn from whenever we see or talk to each other. He remains a source of inspiration. There is nothing left for me to say than thank you, Alfred, from the depth of my heart!

Notes

[1] Alfred Hornung, *Narrative Struktur und Textsortendifferenzierung: Die Texte des Muckraking Movement, 1902–1912* (Metzler, 1978).

[2] Hornung, *Narrative Struktur und Textsortendifferenzierung*.

[3] Hornung, *Narrative Struktur und Textsortendifferenzierung*.

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