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Author
Banerjee, Mita

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Introduction

MITA BANERJEE
Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz

What present could one give a person who has shaped so many different lives on so many different levels, from doctoral students to postdocs, colleagues, coeditors and fellow travelers on the road of transnational American studies? On the occasion of Alfred Hornung's eightieth birthday, this special forum was conceived as a surprise special forum. It was meant to bring together, in the format of a digital publication, all the people that Alfred had worked with and with whom he has collaborated. Importantly for both the special forum and for the idea of transnational American studies, these people are located all over the globe. Not surprisingly, then, this special forum spans many different continents.

When I wrote to the contributors of this special forum, entirely out of the blue and shortly before the summer break, to ask whether they would be on board for this project, they immediately said yes. I am sincerely grateful for all their patience, their spontaneity and their enthusiasm. Without them, on both an ideational and a practical level, this special forum would never have come into existence. More than anything, their enthusiasm and their willingness to contribute a short essay, often on rather short notice, is a tribute to their gratitude to Alfred as a mentor, colleague, or collaborator.

In terms of its content, this special forum is located at the intersection between life writing and transnational American studies. Both these fields have been at the core of Alfred Hornung's own work. His credo, both academically and personally, has been that life writing is never only an abstract or academic endeavor. He has himself engaged in life writing, publishing two bestselling biographies to date: one of Jack London and one of Al Capone. Alfred has also put his own research on life writing, spanning many decades, into creative practice, by not only studying life writing but also authoring pieces of life writing himself. This special forum is a tribute to Alfred's vision

of what academia can be but also a reminder that we should never forget what is outside of academia.

In this spirit, the present special forum was conceived. It collects short essays in which the contributors write about their lives as they have intersected with Alfred's. The essays collected here can be located at the intersection between autobiography and biography. In all our short essays about our work, friendship and collaboration with Alfred, we engage in writing a (mini) biography of Alfred, but we also write about our own lives as they intersected with his or took a particular turn sparked by our conversations or interactions with Alfred.

The idea for this special forum came from Christine Plicht, who is our coordinator at the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at Mainz University, an institute that was founded by Alfred Hornung. In her characteristic pragmatism, Christine suggested that a special forum might be an ideal way of bringing together so many people on so many parts of the globe. However, without the help of Shelley Fisher Fishkin, the cofounder of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, and Pia Wiegmink, its special forum editor, the project would never have taken shape. I am sincerely grateful for Shelley's support; she enthusiastically supported the project from the very beginning, accompanying it in its different stages. Without Pia Wiegmink, this special forum would not exist; she patiently walked me through the entire process, both in terms of conception and actual practicality. Her diplomacy, scholarly vision, and pragmatism were invaluable on so many different levels. At Mainz, our Obama Institute research assistant Paulina Schlosser patiently helped me keep track of all the submissions and of the timeline; without her, this special forum would not have been possible.

There is one more person without whom this special forum would never have come into existence: Sabine Kim. It was Sabine who in her role as the journal's co-managing editor helped us plan the entire project, and who supported it from the very beginning. The special forum was conceived as a birthday surprise: The idea was that it would go online on Alfred Hornung's actual birthday, December 22. Keeping the special forum a secret from Alfred in itself was a major feat for all involved: How to keep a special forum of the *Journal of Transnational American* Studies a secret from the person who is the editor in chief of the journal?

To all the people who have been involved in this birthday surprise project for Alfred Hornung's eightieth birthday, I am sincerely grateful. As many of the essays collected here testify, this special forum may also be an occasion on which we can all reflect on what is most important to us in our research on transnational American studies, but also in our institutional and perhaps also personal lives. For me personally, Alfred Hornung embodies the best that academia can be, not only in his constantly reminding all of us that academia is inextricably linked to the world that surrounds our institutions. In the present moment, perhaps, such an awareness is more necessary than ever. Both life writing and transnational American studies are deeply democratic endeavors. It is in the spirit of an ongoing conversation about our fields of study, but

also the contexts and countries we live in, that we present this special forum to Alfred Hornung on his eightieth birthday. Incidentally, one of the contributors to this special forum suggested a header with which, at the top of each of the pages, all of the essays might be titled: "Alfred Hornung: Special." Dear Alfred: Happy Birthday.