REGIONAL COLLOQUIUM 2016

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AMERICAN STUDIES

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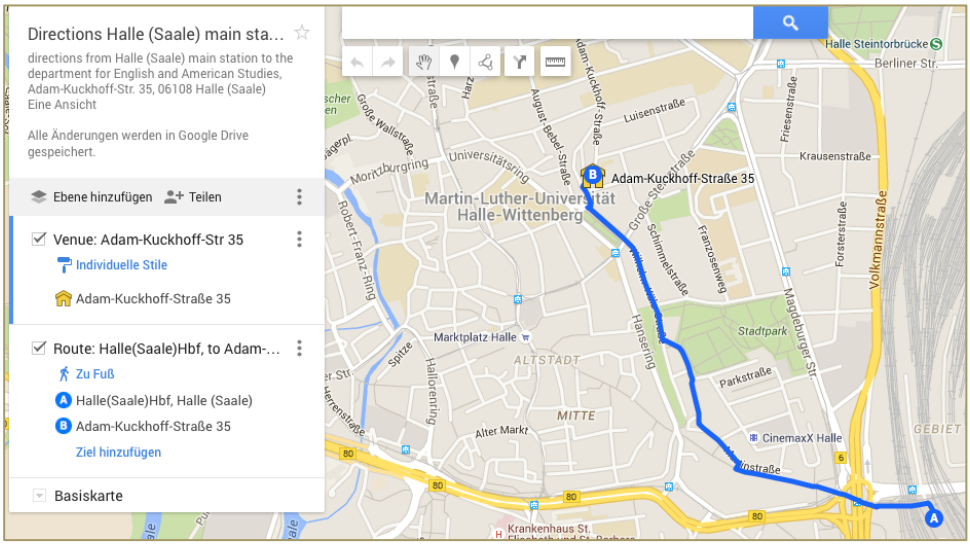

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MUHLENBERG CENTER FOR AMERICAN STUDIES

Program

Friday, April 29, 2016	
10.00	Welcome (Holger Kersten and Erik Redling)
First Session Chair: Holger Kersten / Erik Redling	
10.15 – 11.00	Wiebke Kartheus (Leipzig) "Presenting Art, Preserving Value: The American Art Museum and Capitalism in the 21st Century"
11.00 – 11.45	Sophie Spieler (Berlin) "The Brilliant, the Wealthy, the Few: The Contemporary Discourse of Elite Education in the United States"
11.45 – 12.30	Kathrin Schulze-Riewald (Halle) "Booker T. Washington and the Black Press"
12.30 – 14.00	*Lunch at the* "Moritzkunstcafé" *and walking tour (old campus, market place, Moritzburg)*
Second Session Chair: Erik Redling / Holger Kersten	
14.00 – 14.45	Antonia Purk (Erfurt) "Visual Engagements with History in Jamaica Kincaid's Works Chapter Presentation of the Dissertation Project 'Jamaica Kincaid's Historiopoiesis'"
14.45 – 15.30	Christin Reimann (Halle) "Female Perpetrators and Their Cultural Significance – Examining the Relationship of Gender, Violence and Law in Female American Drama"
15.30 – 15.45	*Coffee Break*
15.45	Organizational matters and farewell

Dissertation Project

"Presenting Art, Preserving Value: The American Art Museum and Capitalism in the 21st Century"

(Working Title)

As a trained art historian and visual studies scholar, I have always been interested in visual art and its meanings, its aesthetics, and as an Americanist in art's content-related politics and effects on its audience. In my BA thesis on Jacob Lawrence, I was driven by the questions why every Americanist I asked only knew the content of some of his works but was not much concerned with his expressive aesthetics and why, on the other hand, nobody in the art department at a German university had ever heard of Jacob Lawrence in the first place. So I tried to connect the two disciplines. During my MA studies I concentrated on the content and form of various visual artefacts in relation to their representational politics as well as to processes of meaning production. Ultimately, these projects led me to an MA thesis in which I started to explore the question of how the value of 'high art' is determined and preserved by way of looking at one art exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery with Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of the artistic field, disavowal, and different forms of capital in mind.

For the purpose of my MA thesis, I considered the art world an enclave that is caught in a circle of self-legitimization and preservation. The removal of a video that was part of the exhibition, then, constitutes a disturbance from the usual course of events that allows for insights into the self-understanding of this largely closed-off system. I focused on addressing and analyzing the underlying structural power mechanisms that were made apparent by this system-destabilizing event rather than the event itself. I took this out-of-order occurrence as a diagnostic opportunity to assess the actions of the agents of the field, who were forced to position themselves publicly in response to the removal. Doing so, I was able to draw conclusions about the system in which these agents operate. Three aspects of the system were especially interesting to me: Firstly, how retracing the reactions to the removal of the video showed how the agents connected to the exhibition engage in a multitude of transactions to gain and/or maintain prestige and reputation in the art world. Secondly, that these transactions reveal the ambiguous relationship between economic and cultural capital that is responsible for the ways in which anxiety becomes a driving force for the agents within the artistic field. Thirdly, these transactions, especially when they are incomplete, expose how the field itself, by means of the

validity of its strict agreed-upon set of rules, compels its members to reproduce these rules and the (values of) the system.

What I am now left with after diving into a charged and wide field like the value of art in society, are, naturally, more questions that should be further researched within an American studies framework. Even though I garnered more insights and gained a deeper understanding for the workings of the art world and its inherent processes, I realized that more time and space is needed to think through different aspects that I encountered during my MA research, to track the connections between these aspects and positions, and to come to terms with American art by way of drawing conclusions from the system in which it is situated. These aspects are:

- The institutionalization of art and the institutionalization of specific interpretations and meanings of art works.
- The museum as an educational institution as well as a capitalist venture.
- The architecture of museums and the way in which they reflect upon a museum's self-understanding as well as upon the value of the institution and the art works it holds.
- The status and value of the art works when museums themselves become the attraction and experiencing art becomes a carefree entertainment package comparable to amusement parks?
- The relationship between art and economics outside of the gallery system.
- The importance of audiences experiencing art works live in the digital age.

Most persistently, one question reoccurs: What happens when the elitist art world is democratized and institutions such as the museum and events such as exhibitions invite the public (and its money) to participate? When I think about this dynamic, and I am certainly not the first one to ask these questions, I always end up wondering about the value of art with all its possible implications and meanings—depending on who is talking: Aesthetic value, economic value, ideological value, educational value, cultural value, social value, emotional value, entertainment value, etc., are only some possible dimensions to talk about the value of art. The boundaries between these different dimensions of value are often blurred, which makes the concept itself hard to grasp and has inspired generations of art thinkers to theorize upon it. But still I deem it necessary to revisit these questions and look at them from an American studies perspective in the 21st century: How is the value of art generated? On what (institutional) levels does it happen? How is value marketed? How is it mediated? And how is it upheld and

preserved? Who decides what is valuable and meaningful? And how is this value transported to mean something to the audience—so that they would visit the museum, pay the entrance fee, look at the art, listen to the audiobooks, eat and drink overpriced things at the museum's restaurant, and leave the rest of their money at the souvenir shop? It's not just the value of art that causes this behavior, it's the *belief* in the value of art that drives so many actions and rituals.

Art itself—and experiencing art—has value and thus has become a commodity that can be consumed and sold—again nothing new here—but curiously most members of the art world still act as if that was not the case or as if their commodity cannot be compared to other commodities. This mechanism of disavowal is needed in order to legitimize, validate, secure, preserve, and conserve the status of the art world as an economic and ideological system. To explore this lack of self-reflexivity, that is contested nowadays yet still in place, Bourdieu's approach that reveal the system's inherent modi operandi was extremely helpful. Especially in relation to all matters economic, Bourdieu's concerns about disinterestedness and disavowal have enabled me to realize and understand the ways in which art is intertwined with economics and the ways in which the art world deals with different forms of capital all the while denying that capitalist modes of operation are in place at all. I am not sure how long Bourdieusian thought will be productive for me in the future because he did not specify on institutions and their position—aspects that I now want to investigate—but his overall relational approach that favors simultaneity over singularity has proven very valuable in discussing systemic dynamics.

At this early point of finding my dissertation project, my interest lies in the role the art museum has in sustaining the value of art in an elitist system in the age of democratization and hyper-capitalism. And what is next is to find an American trajectory that would enable me to follow and explore different flows and networks connected to the art museum. Museums whose collections span several centuries and are "priceless" because they contain all the old masters and well known paintings. Museums whose attendance has exploded over the last 20 years as can be measured by, for example, the 42 million Americans who visited the best art museums in 2009 (Cuno, *Museums Matter*, 2). These numbers have remained stable over the past years and motivated the museums to expand their exhibition space and their galleries. In the last ten years alone, many of America's most renowned art institutions hired architectural bigshots to design and build multi-million-dollar art houses. To name a few: the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, hired Norman Foster to build its Art of the Americas wing; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, hired Renzo Piano for their brand new building in the Meetpacking District; the Milwaukee

Art Museum put itself on the map with a parking garage by Santiago Calatrava, the now-closed Guggenheim Hermitage Las Vegas wanted a museum space designed by Rem Koolhaas; and the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center hired Zaha Hadid for their new building—all prestigious landmark buildings for prestigious institutions that show prestigious art.

Simultaneously, heated debates are going on within museum studies and museum architecture about what the current and future role and position of the art museum should be within society. Some scholars call it a "rentable exhibition halls" that nowadays only caters to the demands of the public and lost track of its initial role as an archive (Cuno, "Against" 55); others call it a place of "preservation" that asks for specific social rituals (Brock 25) and yet again others look at museums as having evolved from being "a theme of its own" to being "a commentary or mirror of contemporary themes" (Belting 76). Thus the new museum as an institution is still coming to terms with its new position and tries "to keep up with the various and sometimes conflicting demands of employees, the public, and the art itself" (Eskin). These lively discussions are very exciting and speak to the currency of a project that would integrate them. Furthermore, they offer different perspectives and far-reaching insights into social, cultural, theoretical, aesthetic, and economic dynamics valuable to American studies.

Right now I am looking at two 'vehicles' so to speak that could help me to weigh the questions and aspects named above and to navigate through the intricate networks they create. One vehicle apt to do so seems to be the Whitney Museum of American Art; an institution that continues to be actively involved in shaping American art and the discourses surrounding it. Tracing the history and influence of this institution, would enable me to come to terms with the self-understanding of the museum itself, to explore the changing standards for American art and the American art museum, and to evaluate a changing environment/society in which art exists and functions. Moreover, since the Whitney just opened their new, iconic building last year, the value of American art and how it is being presented and represented through architecture takes center stage with a project like this. The other vehicle that seems to be suitable is the Guggenheim Foundation with its multiple museums around the globe. The Guggenheim, for financial purposes presumably, opens and closes museums in different countries every few years and to look at these museums and emphasizing the way in which art, and the value of art, become a lucrative investment is fascinating. 'Art as gamble' would be a lens with which I could explore the economic/capitalist side of the art world in the context of art museums as

'edutainers.' Both objects have immense potential but would lead me in different directions with different emphases to come to terms with the museum's role to evaluate and value art.

This research objective might have been formulated before in other disciplines and fields but it is my contention that an important cultural institution such as the museum should be discussed more prominently within American studies and within American studies in Germany; not necessarily as a discursive site of representation or structural exclusion but as a system that mediates value, meanings, and itself. My project should be located at the intersection between American studies, museum studies, art criticism, and architecture. I want this project to be truly interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary.

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Dissertation Project

"The Brilliant, the Wealthy, the Few: The Contemporary Discourse of Elite Education in the United States"

(Working Title)

I. Dissertation Project

Research Interests: My project examines a range of (self-) descriptions of the elite educational space, focusing on the occurrence and negotiation of certain fault lines and tensions in the discourse. In so doing, I am particularly interested in the aesthetics and rhetoric that characterize the discursive articulation of elite education. The current working title reflects my project's three main concerns: the notion of merit, the negotiation of class and capital, and the meanings of eliteness in contemporary America.

Approach, Corpus, and Time Frame: My approach draws on discourse analysis and thick description, meaning that I follow a semiotic understanding of culture as an "interworked system of construable signs" (Clifford Geertz) that can be read and examined. In the different chapters, I thus analyze a wide variety of materials, texts, and discursive formations, including for instance promotional videos, buildings and spaces, novels, and academic studies. The time frame my project is concerned with is the contemporary period; my corpus consists primarily of materials published within the last ten to fifteen years.

Theses: My project departs from two theses. First, that there is a tension between certain American core values—such as equal opportunity, self-reliance, and upward mobility—and the existence of a highly stratified educational system that selects not only on the basis of talent and skill, but also, much more profanely, on the basis of money. This tension between egalitarianism and elitism, I argue, has been a part of the American experiment from its very beginning. Second, I contend that the elite educational space in the course of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century has appropriated a number of meanings that transcend academic education proper. Thus, it works as a cultural signifier and as such is part of the ongoing negotiation and perpetuation of certain grand narratives and national myths in the United States, most importantly that of the meritocracy.

Structure: I begin with an expository chapter that theorizes elite distinction and historicizes elite education in the United States. This provides the theoretical, socio-cultural, and political context for the following three substantive chapters, which focus on discursive formations originating from different positions in the discourse:

1. **'Truly a Magical Place': The Poetics and Politics of Self-Representation at Princeton University**, which focuses on the ways in which Princeton talks about itself by examining a range of promotional and other materials.
2. **'A Yearning for the Picturesque': Fictionalizations of the Elite Educational Space**, which is concerned with fictional portrayals of elite campuses and their contribution to the poetics and politics of the discourse.
3. **'The Chosen and Their Gatekeepers': Elite Education as Object of Critical Inquiry**, in which I read scholarly texts as primary materials to interrogate the emphases placed by researchers and the rhetoric that characterizes academic approaches to the elite educational space.

II. Current Chapter

Working Title: 'Truly a Magical Place': The Poetics and Politics of Self-Representation at Princeton University.

Research Questions: As the first analytical section of my dissertation, this chapter begins the discussion of the discourse of elite education by examining the generative contributions of educational institutions themselves. Initial research questions include:

- which channels of communication are available to elite institutions? how effective are they? whom do they address?
- how do the institutions talk about/present themselves? specific rhetoric? aesthetics? nodal points?
- which aspects are prioritized? which stories do the institutions tell us about themselves?
- which aspects are ignored, suppressed? are there any fault lines, inconsistencies?
- how do the materials negotiate the three central categories my dissertation investigates: merit(ocracy), class/capital, eliteness?

Corpus: As the title indicates, this chapter uses Princeton University as a case study. The corpus is comprised of the Princeton campus; brochures, catalogs, websites; promotional videos; speeches.

Structure and Approach: The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first examines the campus itself as the physical embodiment of the institution and its most immediate form of communication. Drawing on approaches situated within the theoretical framework of what is commonly called the 'spatial turn', I read the university's physical fabric as a legible system of signification that contributes meaningfully to its self-representation. The second section reads various instances of authorized image cultivation, focusing on the one hand on the negotiation of socio-economic factors and on the other on the rhetorical and aesthetic paradigms characterizing Princeton's self-portrayal. In both sections, I am thus interested in the poetics *and* politics of institutional self-representation—in form and style and the meanings inherent therein (meanings that range from affirming values, goals, and socio-cultural imperatives to practices of exclusion and discrimination), but also in the embeddedness of these features in processes of generating institutional power in a highly competitive market.

Theses: My research so far has yielded a number of working hypotheses that I hope to further substantiate as my work on the chapter progresses.

- Princeton presents itself as a charismatic institution and uses quasi-religious rhetoric to talk about itself and the "Princeton experience." There is something vaguely cultish about this language and certain collective practices associated therewith, particularly in the context of the ritualistic celebration of the institution and its community.
- University representatives attribute distinctive, virtually spiritual powers to the place itself, while ignoring the more problematic meanings inscribed into the physical fabric of the campus.
- Princeton claims and aims to be a 'total' institution with ontologically transformative powers rather than 'merely' place of learning and research. The dominant mode of self-representation can be described as a kind of surplus logic that insists that Princeton is "more than […]," but remains vague about the various loci of the institution's uniqueness and import.

Dissertation Project

"Booker T. Washington and the Black Press"

(Working Title)

Context

The turn of the century has been described as the Nadir of African American life (Rayford Logan) because this period faced new heights of ethnic violence and discrimination. The major spokesman for black advancement at that time was Booker T. Washington, who advocated his Tuskegee model of manual training. Much aware of the persistent ethnic tensions, he agreed to suspend black demands for so-called social equality and access to the vote. With this compromising reform policy Washington reaped the meagre aid for his program that was to be had from Northern philanthropists. However, he was wrong to assume that black thrift and industry would be rewarded with gradual civic recognition. The 19th-century social contract of hard work warranting economic advancement and civil rights was not extended across the Color Line. This failed educational policy earned Booker T. Washington a reputation as a sell-out of black interests who gained little in return.

Moreover, his critics from the black intellectual elite charged him with trying to control the public discourse on black advancement and with suppressing any reform ideas other than his. The African American press played a conspicuous role in Washington's endeavor to dominate the discourse. Black editors conceived of their work as an educational contribution toward "Negro Uplift," and many of them openly pursued a political agenda. Thus, they positioned themselves in the spectrum of political positions and sided with individual proponents of these. However, few African Americans who were their potential subscribers could read or afford commodities like newspapers. This is one reason why black editors struggled running their periodicals profitably. As a result, many of them grasped the opportunity for funding from donors like Booker T. Washington when it presented itself.

Journalists who entered into such funding arrangements ran the risk of jeopardizing their independence and found themselves involved in political and publicity maneuvers. Washington was accused of pressuring ill-funded black editors to publicize his policy. This claim was put forth by his critics like W.E.B. Du Bois, but none of them substantiated it. In subsequent decades, no comprehensive research activities were directed towards the black press at the turn of the century as the newspaper material retained from that period is rather scarce. There have been

no thorough investigations elucidating Booker T. Washington's actual involvement with black journalism. In recent years, projects to preserve ancient black newspapers in microfilm and digital form added up to a new basis on which to examine the journalistic output of African American newspapermen in Washington's day. By combining these newly-available resources with Washington's private correspondence with black editors, enhanced insights into his relations with the black press can be gained.

Research Interest

The objective of this project is to assess the dimensions of Booker T. Washington's influence over the African American press. The research done up to this point confirms that he built up a journalistic network under his control. The further comprehensive analysis is intended to supplement the research on Washington's political activity. As yet there have been only isolated examinations of his relations with specific journalists. The guiding questions in this project are the following:

What kind of influence did Washington exert over loyal and critical journalists respectively?

- How did he recruit editors to join his press network?
- To what extent did he control their editorial work and their finances?
- Did he generate consistent news coverage of his policy among loyal editors?
- What measures did he employ against critical newspapermen?
- How did outsiders to his press network fare editorially and financially?

Since the process of research into the above questions is far advanced, a number of substantial theses on Washington's influence on the black press can be put forward: Booker T. Washington sought to exert a maximum of influence over his public image in the black press. As the conditions for running periodicals were dire for black editors, many of them were in need of financial support. Washington pressured editors into reporting favorably about his policy by threatening to make investors withdraw their funding or calling on his loyal journalists to attack the editors in question. He also tried to control black newspapermen who criticized him by buying shares of their newspapers. Washington did not accept plural opinions but regarded them as detrimental to a united black reform position. With financially dependent editors inside his press camp, there was an understanding to treat their relation as a congenial alliance driven by mutual gain. Washington forwarded templates for publication to them and thus controlled his public image directly. He stopped funding those editors who failed to produce the desired coverage and most of these consequently faced bankruptcy.

Current Issues

At the moment, the section of the dissertation discussing the newspaper network in support of Booker T. Washington is nearing completion. Generally speaking, the analysis shows that Washington's involvement with the editorial direction of each paper was pervasive. In a newspaper network that encompassed more than ten publications at times, he followed each of them closely and gave them minute reviews. Washington was aided in this work by his secretary Emmett J. Scott, who managed his correspondence and selected those issues that required Washington's special attention. They communicated with a number of journalists on Washington's payroll who wrote favorably about his policy and reported about the doings of the so-called oppositional press. The usual practice among the members of his network was to exchange articles that met Washington's approval, to praise each other's journalistic work and to forward information about editors outside the network.

Washington corresponded frequently with most of the editors who supported his policy. In their letters, they plainly addressed the issue that these newspapermen were in chronic need of financial support. They negotiated the amount of money Washington was to advance for the continuation of the paper in question and agreed to keep his financial involvement secret. Editors who solicited him for money usually stressed their importance as journalistic defenders of his policy and, what is more, their usefulness as informants about the maneuvers of editors who opposed Washington. They presented themselves as forces to keep "the enemy" in check, as they called it. Washington's adherents, just like other black journalists, were constantly on the verge of ruin, and tried to maintain their newspaper businesses by all available means.

In addition to tracing Washington's relations with individual editors, a major interest of this project is to look at the correlations between them. In this respect, the dynamics of the Atlanta *Voice of the Negro* and the Boston *Colored American Magazine* are instructive. They exemplify Washington's dealing with a magazine that proved difficult to control. When the *Voice* was founded in 1904, Washington immediately contacted the publishers and created amiable relations. The magazine was among the first to address cultural issues beyond the mere necessities of life that were usually catered to black readers. The high journalistic standard and sophisticated make-up rendered the *Voice* appealing to Washington, and just months after its inception, he installed his secretary Emmett J. Scott as an associate editor.

The General Editor John Bowen and Editor-in-Chief Max Barber initially welcomed his support, but soon discovered that Washington tried to interfere with the agenda of the magazine

through his secretary. Max Barber confronted Washington, called in the publishers and caused Scott's dismissal from the *Voice*. After several more futile attempts to influence the editorial output of the magazine, Washington realized that the *Voice* increasingly supported his critics, and he resolved to counter it with a monthly in his hand. He chose the Boston *Colored American Magazine*, which had existed since 1900, and was facing financial trouble. This magazine was a high-quality monthly on literature, culture and religion with a refined design. It could be used to target the same readers as the *Voice* and counter the increasingly critical stance of that magazine. Washington bought the *Colored American* and installed his confidant Frederick R. Moore as its editor. They made an agreement to shift the editorial focus towards black self-help as advocated by Washington. However, he met unexpected obstacles in trying to establish the *Colored American* as the pre-eminent black monthly, and the *Voice* was ready to face the mounting conflict with Washington. This dynamic competition between the two magazines will be specified in the presentation.

Dissertation Project

"Visual Engagements with History in Jamaica Kincaid's Works

Chapter Presentation of the Dissertation Project 'Jamaica Kincaid's Historiopoiesis'"

(Working Title)

I. General Research Interest

How may literature participate in the production of knowledge about the past? In my dissertation project, I am centrally concerned with this question in regard to the works of contemporary Afro-Caribbean-American author Jamaica Kincaid, who in her fictional texts engages collective Afro-Caribbean history since the year 1492. My precursory assumption is that literature is able to perform both personal and collective memory work and that because of its particular characteristics, literature may produce knowledge about the past and with that literature may produce history. The term "historiopoiesis" hence pointedly describes my interests, as in my analyses of Kincaid's engagement with history I particularly focus on the *poiesis,* i.e. the making of history through literature.

II. Tentative Structure

0. Introduction
    - 0.1 General Introduction
    - 0.2 Theory (Signifying)
    - 0.3 Time and Temporalities in Kincaid's Works
1. Text: Narrative Encounters with History
    - 1.1 Signifying Techniques
        - 1.1.1 Narrative Repetition
        - 1.1.2 Intertextuality
    - 1.2 Genre Hybridity and Autobiographical Writing
2. Images: Visual Engagements with History
    - 2.1 Making and Unmaking Representations of the Past:
      Images on the Diegetic Level in *Annie John* and *Lucy*
    - 2.2 Photographic Product(ion)s of the Past:
      The Portraits of *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Mr. Potter*

2.3 A Photo Album of History:

Ekphrasis in *My Garden (Book):* and *See Now Then*

2.4 Conclusion:

Tracing Developments

3. Body: The Personal Body and the Female Body Inscribed by History

3.1 The Personal Body as Memory Site

3.2 The Black Female Body as Site of History

4. Conclusion: Writing Presences

III. Presentation at Regional Colloquium Halle

My presentation will focus on Chapter 2 "Visual Engagements" of the dissertation. Chapter 2 consists of three subchapters analyzing different aspects of visuality occurring in Kincaid's works. A small fourth chapter shall then trace a development in the engagement with history via visuality throughout Kincaid's body of works. I will present findings of my analyses so far, as well as an exemplary short analysis of the role of photography in Kincaid's novel *Annie John*. To provide an overview, what follows here are the draft of a general introduction to Chapter 2, as well as the introduction to 2.1 – the chapter which is specifically concerned with *Annie John.*

Chapter 2 – Introduction

Images: Visual Engagements with History

Before she became an established writer of both fiction and nonfiction, Kincaid was intending to become a photographer. Although she eventually turned to text as the preferred medium, visuality still features strongly throughout Kincaid's works. Looking and seeing are central occupations of most of her characters as early as in the short stories collected in *At the Bottom of the River* (1984) or in *A Small Place* (1988). Visuality is explicitly referred to in such a telling title as "On Seeing England for the First Time" (1991) or that of her latest novel *See Now Then* (2013). Kincaid's fictional characters engage with images and with photographs in particular, above all in *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990). Other texts feature actual images, such as *A Small Place*, "Biography of a Dress" (1992), *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), *My Garden (Book):* (1999), and *Mr. Potter* (2002).

The images in Kincaid's works have intricate relationships with the texts that they are placed with (or, in the case of ekphrases, they are brought forth by text in the first place). In a 1994 interview, Kincaid comments on connections of text and photography: "I was in college and

thought I would be a photographer, and I used to write out my photographs […]—what I would take and how I would set them up. […] I would write down what I thought the picture should feel like. And I would try to take a picture of what I had written down" (Kincaid in Ferguson 163). Such connections of the literal meaning of photography—"writing light"—and actual writing culminate in Kincaid's use of ekphrases, particularly in her later works, *My Garden (Book):*, *Mr. Potter,* and *See Now Then.*

Throughout Kincaid's œuvre, visuality is centrally employed to engage with history as well as with personal past in the sense that visibility in imagery is part of the negotiation of history. In a similar vein, bell hooks notes that not to have one's picture taken means "to stand outside of history" (49), since, as one could add with Susan Sontag, "[t]o photograph is to confer importance" (28). Moreover, like written histories, "visual culture can play its part in redefining culture as a constantly changing, permeable and forward-looking experience of transculture, rather than as a clearly definable inheritance from the past" (Mirzoeff 132). Also in Kincaid's works, the past is all but clearly definable. Rather, it is something that is shaped and reshaped in and by the present, as for instance through an engagement with visual media. Constantly questioning the nexus of visual representations and (past) reality, Kincaid's works reveal the instability of the relationship of signifier and signified in visual and textual images. Thus, the viability of images (and photography in particular) as media to engage with the past is scrutinized. Demonstrating that images are hardly reliable media, Kincaid's works then venture to use them to their own ends and employ them to change the significance of the past and its impact on contemporary lives.

The following chapters aim to investigate the engagement with the past via images in Kincaid's works. Chapter 2.1 "Making and Unmaking Representations of the Past" analyzes images on the diegetic level of Kincaid's texts. The focus here lies on Annie John's iconoclastic acts and Lucy's production of images to demonstrate the characters' rejection to be framed by others in stereotypical (colonial) discourses, their refusal to recognize colonial iconography, and the potential that photography offers to projects of self-making. The concrete photographic portraits that feature in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, "Biography of a Dress," and *Mr. Potter* will be at the center of the following Chapter 2.2 "Photographic Product(ion)s of History" to indicate the production of new versions of the past through the interplay of seemingly authentic photographs and fictional texts. The third Chapter 2.3 "A Photo Album of History" is concerned with Kincaid's ekphrastic technique, especially in *My Garden (Book):* and *See Now Then*. As I

argue, the use of ekphrases, i.e., verbal representations of visual representations that here are established as textual photographs, works to question the possibilities of representation in general and in particular with regard to historical colonial contexts.

Chapter 2.1 – Introduction

Making and Unmaking Representations of the Past:

Images on the Diegetic Level of *Annie John* and *Lucy*

Jamaica Kincaid's earlier works, *Annie John* and *Lucy*, are concerned with images and visuality on the diegetic level. The texts' protagonists use images to engage with both personal past and collective colonial history, as well as to self-fashion contemporary identities. Annie John's iconoclastic engagement with family photographs and images that refer to colonial history decenters the significance of the images' referents and with that the significance of past events. She resists being framed passively and insists on interpreting the past herself. Similarly, Lucy refuses to be framed by stereotypes of immigrant servants and of the exotic other. She actively takes up the photographic apparatus herself to in turn appropriate her surroundings in the US by repeating the colonizing gesture of framing others in her images.

This chapter explores how personal past, colonial history, and both their relationships to the present are addressed by the protagonists' interactions with visual media, and photographs in particular. As a seemingly truthful medium, photography might be thought to provide uninhibited access to the past. However, as I seek to show, in Kincaid's works photographs are not conceived of as faithful renditions of the past that offer themselves up, but constant interpretative work is required for meanings to come forth. Here, meanings are not inherent to images, but are attributed to them by an observer. Moreover, Annie and Lucy do not use images to gain knowledge about the past, but by manipulating and by producing images, they reshape knowledge about the past in a way that aids their identity formations in the present. Accordingly, my inquiry into the characters' engagement with images will not only explore the conception of the ontology of visual representations as put forth in Kincaid's texts, but also the understanding of personal past and collective history as it is laid bare by Annie's and Lucy's visual practices.

Dissertation Project

"Female Perpetrators and Their Cultural Significance – Examining the Relationship of Gender, Violence and Law in Female American Drama"

(Working Title)

Context

As "one of the most recurrent modes of interaction between human beings" (Ceballos Muñoz 1), the social phenomenon of violence is strongly marked by its continuous omnipresence and inherent imposition of hierarchy structures as well as power relations. In its multifaceted occurrence and historical continuity, violence represents a performative act initiated by an agent who intends to influence the behavior of the so-called victim by resorting to means, which are individually perceived as threatening and collectively judged as transgressing acts violating social norms. Thus, violence serves as a tool of control as well subjugation on both levels and has proven effective over centuries of human existence. It equally generates further violent responses – partially as an inversion of power relations by former victims of those actions – and consequently calls for forms of control and containment on an individual and collective level. Due to its incorporation of a binary opposition of the perpetrator and victim linked by force and opposing consequences for the involved agents, violence inherently invites controversial judgments from various individual and societal perspectives and, in itself, unites the dichotomy of an act, which is condemned and institutionalized at the same time. As Ceballos Muñoz highlights correctly, "violence tends to be simultaneously an expression of disapproval and an attempt at imposing a course of action that is not likely to be followed unless violent means are employed" (1-2).

Considering this controversial public and legal sphere of integration and conviction as well as its versatile occurrence and motivation, it is hardly surprising that violence as a socially constructed phenomenon has frequently been treated, explored and marketed in the artistic realm of literature – and especially within drama as a highly direct, performative genre of literary production. An exceptionally intriguing motive to be found in those examples of literary treatment is the one of the female perpetrator. She represents an *outlaw* in a dual sense – not only questioning societal modes of power and hierarchy, but also questioning the traditional gender narrative of the weak and passive female sex (Spierenburg 1). The occurrence and interpretation of the *gender outlaw* in literature underscores a strong link between gender and

violence, whereas the binary opposition of male and female could be attributed to the roles of perpetrator and victim. The shocking effect of this role reversal as well as the display of its inherent oversimplification has frequently been employed by female American playwrights of the early 20th century – literary agents, who have been subjected to those restrictive conceptions of gender and patriarchy themselves and slowly, but steadily made their way into the public sphere of dramatic production. A number of those plays written by female American playwrights at that time were inspired by authentic cases of female deviance and violence which shed a new light on the conception of violence as an exclusively male venture underscored by a legal practice that questioned the deviant potential of women – a tendency which might even be discovered in present-day jurisdiction (Trocmé 2001). Those playwrights called for an alternative kind of legal practice by displaying the female perspective on violence and offered a form of *retrial*, which incorporates central issues of law, gender and society by resorting to the controversial phenomenon of violence.

Research Interests and Central Questions

My project focuses on those representations and re-interpretations of female violence inspired by actual cases and conceptualized by female American playwrights in order to investigate the relevance, impact and function of the murder motive. Focusing on the negotiation female murder case as an extreme incident of violence challenging social assumptions from at least at least a twofold perspective, the description and perception of female perpetrators within the plays shall be analyzed, as well as the plays' reception in a cultural context. Furthermore, the function of actual court cases as a basis for those plays shall be explored.

Central questions are the following:

1. **How is the existence of female perpetrators displayed, explained and perceived in a literary context?**
2. **Which types of female murderers are displayed and how are they sanctioned in a literary and cultural context?**
3. **In how far does the presentation of a *retrial* from a female perspective encourage a potential re-negotiation of gender stereotypes, concepts of violence and/or law?**
4. **Which purpose does the portrayal of female violence based on actual court cases serve?**

5. **Does the factor of authenticity help to reach a broader audience and/or support the renegotiation of gender stereotypes, concepts of violence and law within the plays and beyond?**

Theses

My project is based on three theses. First, that the concepts of violence and law are socially constructed and influenced by gender concepts. Second, that the literary treatment of those concepts does not only create an individual effect within the realm of the play in question, but also challenges the cultural frame is situated in. Third, that this effect is further strengthened by the extreme example of the female murderer, the directness of dramatic production and the reference to actual court cases of murderous women.

Corpus, Method and Categorization

In order to investigate these central questions, my project will focus on plays of the early 20th century – a time when women increasingly entered the public sphere and gained influence for example as playwrights, but also as journalists ad reporters covering actual court cases – a double-function inspiring for example the literary works of Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell. In addition to an analysis of canonical plays like *Trifles* (1916) or *Machinal* (1928) this projects intends to investigate less well-known dramatic works as well. By seeking to analyze the so-called factual treatment of the actual case of violence and the artistic literary reinterpretation, I'd like to investigate the presentation of female violence within literature and the functional framing of the literary narrative with the help actual cases.

An analysis and categorization of the presentation the female violence in works by female American playwrights will be followed by an analysis of legal sanctioning and social criticism within and beyond the plays themselves. Finally, the effect and potential development of the portrayal of female violence based on actual cases shall be explored in more detail.

So far, a preliminary categorization of female murder cases within plays of the early 20th century includes the literary treatment of *homicide*, *viricide*, *suicide* and *infanticide*, but will be further expanded as the project proceeds.