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Berlin Snapshots: Images of the City in Short Fiction¹

The mention of Berlin literature calls to mind works by Theodor Fontane, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and, of course, Alfred Döblin (Brüggemann; Jolles; Fries). The medium of film is acquainted equally with portrayals of the city, harking back to Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin. Die Sinfonie einer Großstadt* (*Berlin. The Symphony of a Great City*, 1927), which focused on the conflicting pressures brought to bear on the city, balancing technological innovation against the rhythms of the city. The Berlin of the 1920s was a city that lived in a vivid present (Brady 86) and is synonymous with images of the Golden Twenties and *Cabaret*. In the ensuing years, it was more Berlin's history than its literature that solidified associations and images in the minds of its citizens and outside onlookers: first as Nazi capital; then as divided city—simultaneously an island of freedom (West Berlin) and a symbol of repression (East Berlin as the capital of the German Democratic Republic); and finally the triumph over the Berlin Wall that news media broadcast across the world. But, we must ask, what has become of Berlin's literature? In 1989, the critic Frank Schirrmacher lamented the lack of "metropolitan literature," for in his opinion, there had been no great post-war Berlin novel. And, following the unification both of Germany and Berlin, critics have awaited the penultimate *Wenderoman* or novel about the turn of events, again to no avail.²

Hajo Steinert, in contrast, argues that a large variety of young writers have turned to Berlin as their subject, primarily because Berlin currently is a city of movement like no other Western city (235). Erhard Schütz draws on the long tradition of city literature, noting that since the nineteenth century, the city has come to be valued as "*der Raum von Erfahrbarkeit und Beobachtbarkeit von Gesellschaft*" (8).³ In the last decade, Berlin has changed so rapidly and

1 I am indebted to my co-editor Dr. Rachel Halverson for her insightful reading of this manuscript. My colleague Dr. James Parsons provided invaluable suggestions for improvements to the manuscript.

2 A variety of scholars have addressed the topic of literary representation of the *Wende* and unification. See, for example, Brockmann; Costabile-Heming, Halverson, and Foell; Welzel, Wehdeking.

3 "*The site both for experiencing and observing society.*" All translations from the German are

radically, that it is difficult to absorb the changes except in a schematic framework. Perhaps because of its sheer size, the diversity of its population, or the wealth of influences that make up the tapestry of Berlin, it seems that it is more appropriate to offer small snapshots of the city than to paint with the broad brush of a novel. And though the Berlin novel is gaining renewed critical attention (Steinert, Jäger, Magenau), I submit that it is recent short prose that best captures the city's essence.

Through an analysis of short fictional representations of Berlin, this essay will chart the impact that the physical, social, and cultural changes have had on writers who are both native to Berlin and relative newcomers, who have well-established writing careers or are just starting out, but all of whom focus on the pressing issues with which writers today are concerned. Katja Lange-Müller's anthology *Bahnhof Berlin* (1997) explores the principle of transit, the city as a vehicle as well as the city in transition. As the first collection chronologically, it harks back to the image that Berlin, particularly West Berlin, has had as a way station. The collection *Die Stadt nach der Mauer* (1998) assembles a group of unknown younger writers, all born after 13 August 1961, the day construction on the Wall began. This collection is very forward-looking, as it seeks to move beyond the images of Berlin as divided city.⁴ Finally, the essay will conclude with an analysis of Romanian writer Carmen-Francesca Banciu's *Berlin ist mein Paris* (2002), a collection of vignettes that show how an immigrant can come to feel at home in the vast and foreign Berlin. The evolution from the transitory in Müller's anthology to the idea of homecoming in Banciu's volume underscores how positively Berlin indeed has changed in the years following unification. This selection of short fiction will highlight the myriad views and impressions that Berlin leaves on its residents and guests, vibrant images of a city whose symphony is as yet unfinished.

Bahnhof Berlin

In her afterward, Katja Lange-Müller writes that the idea of *Bahnhof* (train station) evokes certain associations.⁵ The expression "Ick vasteh nur Bahnhof" is a typical one for Berlin and means literally, because of all the diverse sounds in the city, one only can hear one word clearly, that being *Bahnhof* (287).⁶ Lange-Müller emphasizes the diversity of Berlin, and portrays the city as one

my own, unless otherwise noted.

- 4 In their foreword, the editors note that almost all of the texts in the collection are excerpts of longer works. For the purposes of this essay, however, it is their excerpt quality that is of particular interest.
- 5 Simon Ward delves into the imagery of Berlin's train stations in his contribution to this volume. See also his essay "'Zugzwang.'"
- 6 "I only understand train station." It is noteworthy, that Lange-Müller employs the Berlin dialect in her written rendering of the statement.

that attracts countless visitors, who then somehow, become (willfully) trapped there. Thus the city becomes an allegory for *Transit*, meaning transportation as well as transition. Berlin becomes a type of way station, or temporary stopover. Friedrich Christian Delius opens the anthology with “Der Bahnhof die Mitte der Insel” (“The Train Station the Middle of the Island”), an account of the narrator’s journey to Berlin as a student, where West Berlin not only was once an island surrounded by the Communist East Germany, but also a place where young students could experience: “die unendliche Stadt mit ihren unendlichen Möglichkeiten” (12).⁷ This first image of Berlin is one of endless possibilities, and positive outlooks, a perfect entrance into the city. Delius thus sets up the anthology with memories of what was, leaving room for subsequent contributors to portray what is and what can be. Other contributions, such as Karin Reschke’s “Trippeltosca” (“Triple Tosca”) address the changes in the city and the emotions that those changes create:

Zum einen ist mir die Stadt durch den Sturz der Mauer, den Wegfall der Grenzen zwischen Ost und West schwer erträglich geworden, zum anderen sind meine Plätze, meine Straßen in der Innenstadt, kurzum mein Revier nicht mehr wiederzuerkennen. Gegen die neuen Menschenströme von drüben auf *meinem* Territorium bin ich machtlos, sie verändern das Bild der Stadt vollkommen, und ich kann sie nicht aufhalten, geschweige von mir fernhalten. (53-54)⁸

In the midst of these changes, Thorsten Becker chooses to emphasize that which does not change: “Erstaunlich für mich war weniger das Erhebliche, das sich änderte, als vielmehr das Unendliche, das sich gleichblieb” (192), he writes of his memories of the night the Wall fell.⁹ Others record the city as “schlaflos” (“sleepless,” Kuckart, 86) or depict it as uncaring (Grünbein, 135). Reinhard Jirgl is the most critical in his portrayal in “Hundsnächte” (“Dogs’ Nights”). He delves into the darker, seamier side of the city by creating a stream of consciousness inventory of sights, sounds, thoughts and emotions. He exclaims: “BERLIN: Aufgeblähtes Monstrum” (219), and proceeds to list a variety of accidents and atrocities.¹⁰ The city becomes a monster, and the reader cannot avoid the images of destruction and horror; the reader is forced to fly over the words on the page, as the tempo of the text matches the speed of the city. In the end, the narrator cannot be bothered to retain the horrors he has witnessed, cannot be bothered to offer assistance: “Ich kümmere mich nicht

7 “The never-ending city with its infinite possibilities.”

8 “On the one hand, it is difficult for me to tolerate the city following the fall of the Wall and the disappearance of the border between East and West. On the other hand, all of my haunts, my streets in the inner city, in short my beat is barely recognizable. I am powerless against the new streaming masses from over there into *my* territory. They change the city’s image totally, and I can’t stop it, can’t even keep it away from me.”

9 “Surprising to me was not the monumental that changed, but much more the never-ending that remained the same.”

10 “BERLIN: Overblown monstrosity.”

darum, berühre die gußeiserne Klinke, die Tür öffnet sich leicht" (222).¹¹ Here the narrator seeks solitude and also security, a place inside and away from the horrors of the outside.

Not all of the texts in this anthology are so negative. In "Märksicher Sand im Getriebe" ("Sand from the Mark in the Gears"), Jens Sparschuh's narrator experiences a feeling of homecoming ("Heimatgefühl"), as he drives along the autobahn toward Berlin (209). Ironically, Sparschuh's narrator also continues to experience a sense of *Teilung* or division, though not in the usual sense of a divided Berlin. Sparschuh describes the difference that exists between Berlin and its surroundings, the Mark Brandenburg, where the urban is depicted as superior to the rural. Brigitte Burmeister also rejoices in the feelings of homecoming in "Rückkehr nach Berlin im Sommer 92" ("The Return to Berlin in the Summer of '92"), for the city is still there, although many had turned their backs on it. As the train enters the city and stops at *Bahnhof Zoo* (Train Station Zoo), there is great hustle and bustle as passengers exit the train. Yet Burmeister narrates a distinct difference between arrival in the West and arrival in the East. As the train travels eastward, much of the cityscape disappears, leaving the impression of "Erdbeben, Krieg und marodierende Banden" (257).¹² The reader then expects something negative to happen, but the narrator is actually happy to have returned: "Ich werde aufschließen, eintreten und mir sagen, daß ich wieder zu Hause bin" (258).¹³

In an ironic look at destruction and the city, Alban Nikolai Herbst pokes fun at demolition in "Ein Sprengmeister" ("An Explosives Expert"). Demolition, bombings and destruction form a great part of the fabric of Berlin's twentieth-century history, for each successive political power has sought either to put a new face on Berlin, or to help the city resurrect itself after the bombings of World War II. For Herbst, present day demolition is a progressive act: "Die Sprengung indessen ist [...] die Fortsetzung der Bombardierung mit zivilen Mitteln" (261) and explosives experts are the "Zahnarzt der Städte" (259).¹⁴ Herbst pokes fun at the way city planners use architectural development to try to erase the past, "die Vergangenehit auf den Müll der Geschichte zu werfen, wohin sie gehört" (261).¹⁵ In this tongue-in-cheek speech, Herbst pleads for the continued demolition of history-laden buildings, in particular the *Palast der Republik* (Palace of the Republic), out of "hygienischen Interesse der deutschen Geschichte" (265), for "Demokratie und Geschichte schließen einander bedingungslos aus" (266).¹⁶ Indeed, in order to establish democracy, one must abolish history. This prompts me to ask, is this

11 "I don't concern myself about it, touch the wrought iron handle, the door opens easily."

12 "earthquake, war, bands of looters."

13 "I will unlock the door, enter and say to myself, that I am home."

14 "Detonation is in the meantime [...] the continuation of bombardment using civilized means"; "the cities' dentist."

15 "to throw the past onto the garbage dump of history where it belongs."

16 "hygienic interest in German history"; "democracy and history are mutually exclusive."

not precisely what the constant re-building of Berlin is trying to do? In contrast to this humorous look at the ever-changing Berlin, another common theme of the anthology emphasizes the timelessness of the city, the conflation of past and present: "Ein milder Abend im März, kurz nach Einführung der Sommerzeit [...]. Es könnte ein Mittag vor vierzig Jahren sein [...]. Oder eine Dämmerung hundert Jahre danach [...]. Oder im Jahr 1207 [...]" (Grünbein 136).¹⁷

Monika Maron's "Kleine Berliner Rede" ("Small Berlin Speech") emphasizes the connection between the city and its inhabitants. Maron's narrator maintains: "Es gibt nicht viele Berliner in Berlin" (233), and as one of the few, she is almost an anomaly.¹⁸ For the most part, the true Berliners inhabit the traditional working class districts of *Neukölln*, *Tempelhof*, *Wedding* (of former West Berlin) or *Friedrichshain* and *Prenzlauer Berg* (in the East), all areas that lie outside of the normal tourist routes. As she maps out the Berlin topography, Maron links the relative lack of original Berliners to the city's difficult history: "Sie finden in Berlin nicht, was man in Städten mit einer normalen Vergangenheit eine Gesellschaft nennt, altes Geld und neues Geld, alte Familien mit schlechten oder guten Namen. Sofern die Träger dieser Namen Juden waren, haben die Nationalsozialisten sie vertrieben oder ermordet" (233).¹⁹ Maron does not limit her critique to Berlin's Nazi past, condemning too the "treue Staatsdiener" ("loyal state servants") who banished middle class existence from the Eastern part of the city. Indeed, the Eastern dictators divided the city, a fact that Maron experienced in her own family.

The final text in the volume, Thomas Knauf's "Ab durch die Mitte. Ein Liebesversuch" ("Straight through the Middle. An Attempted Love Story") is an appropriate précis of the sentiments expressed in the volume. Unlike Maron, Knauf is not a born-Berliner, but someone who moved to the city and tried to love it: "Zwanzig Jahre blieb ich in Berlin, ohne es zu mögen. Nicht als mauerblümelige Provinzcapitale DDR, nicht als Multikulti-Oase der Wüste Bundesrepublik und erst recht nicht als Ausgrabungsstätte verspäteten Nationalgefühls" (283).²⁰ Such sentiments have been expressed by numerous writers throughout history from Erich Kästner to Robert Walser to Carl Sternheim to Karl Gutzkow. Eventually, however, Knauf returns to Berlin, under the pretense of remaining a disinterested neutral observer. To his surprise, however, the unified Berlin has changed, and is now a site for

17 "A mild evening in March, shortly after the start of daylight saving time [...]. It could be midday forty years ago [...]. Or dusk 100 years later [...]. Or the year 1207 [...]."

18 "There are not many Berliners in Berlin." Maron goes on to explain that even such typical Berliners as herself have Polish or at the very least Huguenot ancestors (236).

19 "You won't find in Berlin, what one in cities with a normal past would call a society, old money and new money, old families with bad or good names. To the extent that the owners of these names were Jews, they were banished or murdered by the National Socialists."

20 "I stayed in Berlin for twenty years without liking it. Not as the wallflower provincial capital of the GDR, not as multi-cultural oasis for the desert Federal Republic and especially not as an excavation site for repressed national feelings."

“Hoffnung” or hope for the future, leading him to learn to love Berlin “Weil ich inzwischen die ganze Bundesrepublik gesehen habe und die halbe Welt. Und jedesmal froh bin, wieder hier zu sein” (286).²¹ In general the texts in this anthology portray the multi-faceted city of Berlin as both exciting and terrifying. These established writers clearly value the city for the experiences they have gained there, yet, at the same time, they offer an analytical approach, often a distanced and critical perspective in their contributions. Less-established writers, on the other hand, tend to greet Berlin with an even greater openness.

Die Stadt nach der Mauer

Five story excerpts in particular capture the essence of what the editors, Jürgen Jakob Becker and Ulrich Janetzki had hoped to convey: “umgearbeitete Auszüge aus der beabsichtigten Großform Roman—work in progress, city in progress. Sie propagieren keinen Neuanfang [...]” (10).²² In “In Berlin” Perikles Monioudis is unable (or perhaps unwilling?) to present a uniform story in the form that readers normally expect. Instead of plotlines and protagonists, readers find only fleeting impressions from the perspective of an unnamed narrator. This narrator sits in a bus, strolls along the streets of Berlin or observes passersby from the vantage point of a café table: “Indem ich durch die Stadt streife und sie monogrammiere, gerate ich, als Betrachter, aus der Welt” (15).²³ No corner of the city remains unsurveyed, as the narrator ventures in all directions of the city, from the well-known *Ku’damm* to the lesser known *Wedding* and *Hohenschönhausen*. This narrator embodies the new-styled flaneur, who experiences the city from a distance, no longer a part of that which he observes: “In Gesellschaft gibt es nichts zu notieren” (16).²⁴ Despite this appearance of solitude, the narrator goes about his observations with an exceedingly positive outlook, exclaiming: “‘Guten Morgen!’ möchte ich sagen, als ich auf die Straße trete [...]” (23).²⁵ This collection of impressions leaves the reader wondering to what purpose they have been gathered. There is no definitive organization to them, nor is there any sense

21 “Because I have seen in the meantime the entire Federal Republic and half of the world. And I am happy every time that I am here [in Berlin].”

22 “revised excerpts from the large-form novel—work in progress, city in progress. They do not propose a new beginning [...]”

23 “By traversing the city and turning it into a monogram, I, as observer, become removed from the world.” In reading this text, I was left with the impression of fleeting movement, which Karein Goertz and Mick Kennedy also describe in their essay on the Berlin *S-Bahn* in this volume.

24 “In society there is nothing worth taking note of.” Here, *Gesellschaft* can serve two functions, on the one hand referring to society at large, and, on the other, referring to being among people. This latter reference underscores the loneliness of the narrator.

25 “‘Good morning!’ I would like to say as I step into the street.”

that they lead to a specific conclusion. Indeed, the reader can come away unfulfilled, for there is also an ironic undertone: "Durcheinander der Lebensstile: Ostdeutschland" (24).²⁶

In his short vignettes, "Drei Feuilletons" ("Three Feuilletons"), Steffen Kopetzky delves into the psyche of Berliners, touching on a type of inferiority complex. In some instances, their behavior, he concludes, derives from the city's relationship (or lack thereof) with the surrounding areas. For example, Berlin's unusual relationship with nature: "Der Berliner kennt die Natur nur in Form von Parkanlagen und dem Botanischen Garten" (68), an observation that glosses over the earlier division of the city, when such constructed forms of nature were the only means for West Berliners to escape from the "city."²⁷ He also stresses the differences between Berlin and other European metropolises, in particular Munich and Vienna, whose characteristics derive from their ostensible refinement. Berlin is more proletarian, especially according to Kopetzky's portrayal of the district of *Neukölln*. Despite its proletarian tradition, the city offers one of Kopetzky's characters, Martin, a pleasant solitude: "wo er niemanden kannte, wo er täglich in der U-Bahn sitzen, ein Buch mit sich nehmen und es auch lesen konnte, weil in der U-Bahn einfach niemand war, mit dem er sich hätte unterhalten müssen [...]" (77).²⁸

In Micha Schmidt's "Steffen geht über die Schönhauser" (Steffen walks along the Schönhauser [Allee]), the reader receives an inside look at the changes that have taken place since the fall of the Wall from the vantage point of an East German narrator. Life in *Prenzlauer Berg*, one of the Eastern districts of Berlin, has benefited from the urban renewal brought about by the *Wende*: The bright cafés of the present have replaced the border guards and controls of the narrator's past. Comparisons between the present and the GDR's past conjure up questions about positives and negatives, as the narrator states: "Alles kann nicht schlecht gewesen sein" (146).²⁹ The contrast with the past seems most glaringly obvious at the newsstands on *Alexanderplatz*, where the pressure to be the first to report anything has replaced the art to disguise and omit; the GDR's real news was in the omissions. The ability to cross borders, to encounter new experiences has a profound effect on the narrator: "Ich bin müde und gereizt ob der vielen Eindrücke" (156); the other half of the city provides solace and comfort: "Ich laufe zurück, in meinen Teil der Stadt, den ich wohl noch sehr lange so empfinden werde" (156).³⁰

26 "Chaotic assembly of lifestyles: East Germany."

27 "The Berliner only knows nature in the form of parks and the botanical garden." Kopetzky compares the behavior of the Berliners to the inhabitants of Munich, a city located at the center of a larger rural area.

28 "Where he didn't know anyone, where he could sit in the subway each day, take a book along and read it, because there was absolutely no one in the subway with whom he would have to converse [...]"

29 "Not everything could have been bad."

30 "I'm tired and irritated by the many impressions"; "I return to my part of the city, which I probably will view as such for a long time."

Moritz Rinke presents an amusing look at the historically stereotypical Berlin woman in “Versuch über die Berlinerin” (“Portrait of the Berlin Woman”). Rinke’s narrator captures the essence of the female Berliner in the following formula:

Aura (Hauptstadtkultur)
 Disziplin (Otto von Bismarck)
 und Weltzugewandtheit (Melting Pot)
 müssen sich in ihr zu einer
 FRAU
 vereinigen. (172)³¹

An acquaintance counters that this female could not possibly exist: “Richtige Berlinerinnen gibt’s an den Kassen in Supermärkten oder auf dem Bürgersteig der Oranienburger. Aber die wirklich tollen Frauen, die in Literaturcafés sitzen und Feuilleton lesen, die kommen aus Köln, München oder Hamburg” (173).³² For the narrator, the search for the prototype becomes an obsession. His quest takes him first to *Charlottenburg*, where he visits the cheese counter at the Kaiser’s grocery store on *Bismarckstraße*. When he mistakenly asks for Gouda while pointing at Emmentaler, the attractive blond behind the counter replies, “Das ist Emmentaler, junger Mann!” in such a disarming way, that he immediately buys some 14 varieties of cheese.³³ It seems that the *Spruch*, the saying, is part of the essence of the prototypical Berlin female, for the narrator encounters a wide variety of such sayings, and each is uttered by a woman he considers in some way classical: the coat check who replies: “Na, denn mach’s jut und 1000 Küsse!”³⁴ The ability to utter such sayings derives from a “Kühle” or aloofness that allows a Berlin woman simultaneously to complain about all the mistakes that abound in the world while enjoying their existence. As he is able to bring to mind an increasing number of Berlin women, he concludes that there is nothing to his search, for the Berlin woman is a “Mischung von zum Beispiel Hugenotten, Holländern, Slawen, Rheinländern, Pfälzern, Schweizern, Schlesiern und Niederdeutschen” (188).³⁵

Finally Annette Gröschner’s “Rest Esplanade” (“Ruins of the Esplanade”) takes readers to the *Potsdamer Platz* construction site, where the emptiness of

31 “Aura (capital city culture)
 Discipline (Otto von Bismarck)
 and world-openness (Melting Pot)
 have to unite in her to form a
 WOMAN.”

32 “There are real Berlin women only working as cashiers in supermarkets or walking the *Oranienburgerstraße*. But the real great women, who sit in literary cafés reading the feuilleton, they come from Cologne, Munich or Hamburg.”

33 “That is Emmentaler, young man.”

34 “Well, have a good evening and 1000 kisses!”

35 “A mixture of for example Huguenots, Dutch, Slavic, from the Rheinland and Palatinate, from Silesia and low Germany.”

the place conjures up images of the site's past history for the unnamed female protagonist. Within the emptiness lie the ruins of the Hotel Esplanade: the *Kaisersaal* (Kaiser's Room) and the *Frühstücksraum* (Breakfast Room). These ruins are still visible today, an integral part of the Sony Center complex.³⁶ They awaken memories of 26 February 1945 when the entire *Potsdamer Platz* was engulfed in flames. Only a few months before the end of the war, the destruction erased all traces of the once vibrant square, and for the protagonist, the Café Josty is merely a memory. Within the Sony Center complex, the Café Josty has received a new lease on life, for it occupies the newly built ground floor of the Esplanade. The new café hopes to recall the vibrant coffee house culture and meeting point of the original from the 1920s. The contrast between old and new and the desire to feel secure in the metropolis are themes at the heart of these literary portrayals. These less-established writers, many of whom are not native to Berlin greet the city and their experiences in it with a refreshing openness. It is a similar sense of adventure that draws international immigrants to the city as well. As the Carmen-Francesca Banciu's stories show, an immigrant can have the same mixed feelings toward the city that natives have.

Berlin ist mein Paris

There is little doubt that Berlin is becoming an international city and, as such, there is a steady influx of foreigners seeking work, adventure or a better life. Increasingly these transplanted Berliners are entering the literary and public spheres with works written in German that seek to convey their experiences in their new homeland.³⁷ The Rumanian-born Carmen-Francesca Banciu first crossed into Germany through Bavaria, and it was always her intention to reach Paris, where other Rumanian writers like Eugène Ionesco achieved notoriety.³⁸ She never achieves this goal, for as the stories' title states: "Berlin ist mein Paris," the place where: "Ich habe in Deutschland die Lebenslust entdeckt" (8).³⁹ This statement undeniably links Banciu and the city, and the books' tales are autobiographical reports of her experiences and encounters in

36 In order to preserve the rooms, they were moved 75 meters. Luxury apartments are now a part of the Esplanade complex, with the new construction cantilevered over the old. One additional building, the *Weinhaus Huth* was unscathed and remains a central point of the *Potsdamer Straße* today.

37 One of the most successful has been the Russian immigrant Wladimir Kaminer, who in addition to achieving success as an author with his works *Russendisko* (2000) and *Schönhauser Allee* (2001) is also a regular contributor to the Berlin city magazine *zitty* as well as *Die Zeit*. Furthermore, Kaminer was instrumental in establishing the radio series *Radio Multikulti*, a station in Berlin that broadcasts in different languages. In 2003, the Turkish-born Yadé Kara achieved notoriety with her first novel, *Selam Berlin*.

38 The book jacket describes her biography, and notes that she has lived in Berlin since November 1990.

39 "Berlin is my Paris"; "In Germany I discovered a lust for life."

Berlin, and as such, the entire book reads as a chronological progression of her life in Berlin.⁴⁰ Banciu insists that it was not her decision to reside in Berlin, but opts instead to refer to "life" as having made the choice: "Das Leben selbst hat mir Berlin ausgesucht" (38).⁴¹ It is a choice, however, with which she is completely comfortable: "All das zu beobachten, ist inzwischen auch meine Entscheidung. Sich entscheiden zu dürfen, bringt Freude" (38).⁴² Throughout, the reader seeks the answer to one question: What compelled her to surrender her dream of a life in Paris for her current existence in Berlin. In the paragraphs that follow, I will analyze Banciu's journey as one of self-discovery and reflection, a task possible only in the Berlin of the here and now, a city uniquely premised on past and present and East and West.⁴³

At age 35, Banciu greets Berlin at Checkpoint Charlie, the only logical starting point because it serves as "Metapher der Absurdität," the only place where Germany's division becomes understandable (9).⁴⁴ And, Banciu returns repeatedly to this district of Berlin, spending her afternoons in *Café Adler* and *Sale e Tabacchi*, two restaurants in the immediate vicinity of the border crossing. In an interview, Banciu remarked that her love for Berlin derives from the fact that she finds the city so "geopolitically fascinating" (Mancini 186). As the first metropolis she visited after the end of the Ceaucescu dictatorship in Romania, she could still sense the way that Berlin functions as a crossroads between East and West (Mancini 187). In an interview she remarked:

Für mich ist die Nähe zum Checkpoint Charlie ein Ort der Erinnerung an die Trennung der Systeme und des Landes. Er hat mit meiner Geschichte, aber auch mit der Geschichte dieser Stadt zu tun. Darüber muss ich schreiben. Auch über diesen Schmerz der Trennung und der Isolation, der deswegen in mir drin ist und der vielleicht irgendwann verschwinden wird. (Schwab)⁴⁵

She resides on the *Leipziger Straße*, not far from *Sale* and near where the Wall once was. She describes her preference for this location: "Ich habe immer an der Grenze gelebt und die Grenze immer als Herausforderung empfunden"

40 A number of the texts relate directly to specific current events, for example "Welcher Farbe hat der Frieden" ("What Color is Peace") responds directly to the war in Kosovo, and "Verlierer an allen Ecken und Enden" ("Losers at Every Turn") makes passing reference to 11 September 2001.

41 "Life itself sought Berlin out for me."

42 "To observe everything [the changes] is, in the meantime, my decision. To be allowed to decide, brings joy."

43 In his review, Nils Müller writes that "[g]emeinsam mit dem Leser beobachtet sie sich selbst" ([t]ogether with the reader she observes herself").

44 "Metaphor for absurdity."

45 "For me, the vicinity to Checkpoint Charlie is a reminder of the [political] division of the systems and the country. It has to do with my history, but also with the history of this city. I have to write about that. Also about the pain of division and isolation, which is in me because of this and perhaps will disappear someday."

(Schweizer).⁴⁶ She views her own biography and that of the city as having something in common: "Alles ist offen und geschieht rasant" (Schwab).⁴⁷

Berlin encompasses both Bucharest and Paris: East Berlin's struggle to emerge from its communist past has much in common with Bucharest. The Western side of the city embodies the effortlessness of Parisian life.⁴⁸ And, the city has the same draw as Paris, for it has become a place where artists can come to see if their works can find resonance outside of their homelands (Schwab). But even more important is the unfinished aspect to the city:

Vielleicht ist es auch so, dass Berlin durch seine geografische Lage und seine ganz spezielle politische Rolle in Europa ein Ort des Durchwanderns ist. Wie bei der Völkerwanderung. Ein Kommen und Gehen. Die Menschen ziehen durch die Stadt und hinterlassen Spuren. Dadurch wird sie nie fertig. (Schwab)⁴⁹

For Banciu, Berlin is a metaphor: "Der Ausdruck für die entstehende Gegenwart. Für die zukünftige Geschichte" (52).⁵⁰ But the connection to Berlin is also much more personal, tied to her own quest for identity: "Ich bin Berlin verbunden durch die Aufgaben, die es mir stellt. Durch die Freiheit, die es mir lässt, das Atmen wieder zu lernen und das Lernen zum Ausdruck zu bringen" (53).⁵¹ And, Berlin is special, because of its geography, its history, its politics, its potential: "Berlin hat eine Sonderstellung. Seit mehr als fünfzig Jahren. Und bis heute hat sich daran nichts geändert. Denn so beliebt und so verhasst ist keine deutsche Stadt. Und keine ist so kühn und so bewegt" (90).⁵²

One of the most fascinating aspects of her narrative style, is that the reader immediately senses that Banciu feels completely at ease in Berlin, a fact that she finds surprising, for "in Berlin spricht man so viel von Entwurzelung" (35).⁵³ As she begins to assimilate into her new life, Paris retreats and Berlin takes center stage: "Berlin habe sich in den Nabel der Welt verwandelt," because it is there that she is able to discover herself (43).⁵⁴ Even in terms of language, Banciu views German as an advantage, in particular as her children

46 "I always lived on the border, and always found the border to be a challenge." One can also translate *Grenze* as edge. Banciu was well aware of the lies and contradictions rampant in Rumania under communism and tried to work against these. In this way, we can speak of her as "living on the edge."

47 "Everything is open and happens so quickly."

48 See also Schweizer.

49 "Perhaps it is also the fact that because of its geographic location and special political role in Europe that Berlin is a place for passing through. Like in the migrations. A coming and going. The people move through the city and leave traces behind. In this way, it [the city] is never finished."

50 "The expression for the developing present. For the future history."

51 "I am bound to Berlin by the tasks that it sets for me. Through the freedom that it grants me to learn how to breathe again, and to express that learning."

52 "Berlin has a special status. For more than fifty years. And even today nothing that has not changed. Then no German city is so loved and so hated. And none is so sharp and so lively."

53 "in Berlin one speaks so often of up-rooting."

54 "Berlin has evolved into the center [literally bellybutton] of the world."

become comfortable in their new language. Somewhat melancholically she addresses the question of homesickness, which is less associated with people and objects than with memories. She came to Berlin alone first, her family followed; they left everything behind, however, not even bothering to bring family photos. Instead they waited until they were comfortable, "at home" so to speak, in Berlin, and brought them later: "Und als wir nach Jahren die Fotos, die Bücher und das Besteck hierbringen, hat das eine andere Bedeutung. Ein anderes Gewicht. Es ist der Schwere enthoben" (112).⁵⁵

As an "outsider," or at least as one who brings a more distanced perspective to the city, Banciu questions the preoccupation of Berlin with its past, warning that the city should not suffocate on its own history: "Und trotzdem darf man keine Seite ausradieren. [...] Wer will die Geschichte zurückdrehen? Und ist das gut?" (128).⁵⁶ Of utmost importance for both the writer and her subject, the city is learning to bridge the past and accept the present. Banciu remarked: "Mein entstehendes Werk ist eine Brücke, ein Weg, der Menschen aus Osten und Westen zusammenbringt. Sie gegenseitig zur Verständigung und Toleranz animiert" (Schwab).⁵⁷ This quotation best exemplifies the unbreakable bond between Banciu and the city—as the city grows, so too does she.

Conclusion

In their anthology, Becker and Janetzki maintain: "als Literaturstadt ist Berlin längst Metropole" (11).⁵⁸ Throughout its history, Berlin has attracted countless writers, a fact that neither war nor division nor unification can change. As Banciu's book highlights, Berlin is in the process of usurping world status from cities such as Paris. In an interview with Susanne Ledanff, Ulrich Janetzki describes Berlin as the one place where one always is "abrupt mit den Sachen konfrontiert."⁵⁹ He takes this confrontation out of such binaries as East-West to encompass also the rapid changes taking place in the world of media. All of the texts discussed here also manage to move beyond black and white comparisons, to get past the juxtaposition of East and West to show that

55 "And when we bring the photos, books and silverware to Berlin years later, it has a different meaning. It is another weight. It is relieved of its heaviness." Banciu also relates in a story that even Romania has become a foreign place after years of living in Berlin: "Irgendwie ist auch Rumänien zum Ausland geworden. Denn wir sind nicht mehr so, wie wir waren, als wir noch dort lebten" (147). "Somehow Romania also has become a foreign place. Because anymore we aren't like we were, when we lived there."

56 "In spite of this one cannot erase one side. [...] Who want to turn back history? And is that good?"

57 "My work in progress is a bridge, a way to bring the people from East and West together. To animate them toward understanding and tolerance."

58 "As a literary city, Berlin is already a metropolis."

59 "Abruptly confronted with things."

Berlin is a multifaceted city, a city of darkness and light, a city of humor and irony. Each of the authors treated in the essay has managed to capture a snapshot of Berlin, a small moment frozen in time, marking that time, but which cannot stand alone. Until the penultimate *Wenderoman* has been written, these short prose pieces provide readers with the true variety of impressions that are Berlin.

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