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**Perspectives on the Borderline:
Julia Franck's *Lagerfeuer***

This chapter focuses on Julia Franck's novel *Lagerfeuer* (2003), which is set in the emergency reception camp in the Berlin district of Marienfelde in the late 1970s. As this analysis will show, Franck's narrative uses the borderline space of the camp to interrogate the relationship between the two Germanies during the Cold War era. Moreover, both its shifting narrative perspective and its focus on surveillance allow this relationship to be examined from a variety of different viewpoints. Finally, with its inclusion of a Jewish character and its incorporation of a number of Jewish elements, the novel also raises questions regarding the way in which Jews are viewed by East and West German society in the post-war era.

In the course of the first decade of this century, Julia Franck (b. 1970) has established herself as one of the most important female voices on the German literary scene. Although the writer was tarred with the brush of the so-called 'literarische[s] Fräuleinwunder' in the late 1990s,¹ her critical and commercial success in recent years has ensured that she is now seen as more than a mere wonder girl. In particular, the award of the prestigious Deutscher Buchpreis in 2007 for her epic tome *Die Mittagsfrau* catapulted the writer to international fame. Franck has published five novels and two volumes of short stories to date, a number of which have now been translated and very well-received abroad.²

Franck's work often involves a retrospective view on certain historical epochs, and it frequently features characters who are outsiders, figures who defy social norms or who are excluded from or live on the fringes of society. Her writing questions accepted narratives of history by focusing on the fate of those people who are not usually the subject of historical enquiry.³ Thus, *Die Mittagsfrau* (2007) offers an alternative perspective on the history of the two World Wars by depicting the personal struggles of the mothers, daughters, and sisters who are left to hold the fort whilst their men are fighting on the front.⁴ Franck's most recent narrative, *Rücken an Rücken* (2011), depicts life in East Berlin in the late 1950s and early 60s from the point of view of two children neglected by a mother who is committed to the socialist state. These novels offer a

type of 'history from below' that both complements and challenges the dominant historical narratives of the twentieth century.⁵

Although Franck's third novel *Lagerfeuer* (2003) has been largely overshadowed by the international success of *Die Mittagsfrau*, this critically acclaimed narrative likewise offers a view of history from below. This time, the focus is on the relationship between East and West Germany during the Cold War era, as seen from the perspective of four peripheral individuals attempting to navigate its complexities. *Lagerfeuer* is set in the refugee camp of Berlin-Marienfelde in the late 1970s. Franck's narrative taps into a broader trend in post-Wende German literature that involves looking back on the period of division as a way of coming to terms with contemporary issues of Heimat and belonging. Her novel uses the fictional stories of four characters that make the move from East to West to challenge prevailing images of the German-German relationship.

The Marienfelde refugee camp was initially set up in 1953 as an emergency reception centre to deal with the vast numbers of East Germans leaving the oppressive and impoverished East every day to begin a new life in West Berlin and in other parts of the Federal Republic. These refugees were given temporary accommodation, food, and clothing while they waited for their applications for West German residency to be processed. After the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the numbers of refugees declined significantly, but right up until its closure in 1990, the camp continued to offer shelter to those who managed to leave East Germany and other Eastern bloc countries, whether through legal or illegal channels.⁶

Franck was personally acquainted with the Marienfelde refugee camp, having lived there for nine months after she left East Berlin with her mother and three sisters in October 1978. In a short autobiographical narrative published in 2009 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Franck describes her own experience of Marienfelde: 'Im Herbst 1978 im Notaufnahmelager Berlin-Marienfelde angekommen, erschien uns der Westen alles andere als golden, sonnig und frei'.⁷ She describes how the family of five was accommodated in one room, which measured about fifteen square metres, in a two-room apartment that they shared with a Russian family. The camp itself was surrounded by a high security fence topped with barbed wire, and its occupants – Franck uses the word 'Insassen', evoking obvious connotations of prison – were guarded around the clock, ostensibly for their own protection. Every morning, on their way to school, the children had to pass a barrier with a

gatekeeper, and food was dispensed in exchange for coupons allocated to each family. Even for an eight year old, life in the camp was characterised by suspicion and mistrust:

Die Schilder über den Betten, man sollte mit niemandem sprechen, dass sich Spitzel im Lager befinden können, die nahm ich als Kind gar nicht wahr. Auch ohne diese Schilder wusste ich, dass ich jedem Menschen in meiner Umgebung misstrauen sollte.⁸

As one might expect given the circumstances of their new life, Franck and her sisters had very ambivalent feelings towards the West, and the author describes how these early experiences produced a sense of disorientation in her:

Die Grenze, die Mauer, das Trennende an ihr bestimmte die nächsten Jahre meines Lebens. Die Kompassnadel für das Wort 'drüben' hatte ihre Nordung verloren, sie zeigte nicht mehr in den Westen, sie zeigte überhaupt nicht mehr eindeutig, mal zeigte sie von Ost nach West, mal von West nach Ost – mit diesem Wort fehlte auch mir die sonst so feste Nordung eines Deutschen inmitten seiner Teilung.⁹

While Franck goes to great pains to emphasise that *Lagerfeuer* is not an autobiographical text, she does concede that she incorporated certain elements of her experiences in the Marienfelde camp into the novel.¹⁰ Thus, she uses this novel to explore an area of her own past and simultaneously a part of German history that has not been given much attention up until now.

Franck's *Lagerfeuer* uses the borderline space of the Marienfelde camp to interrogate the relationship between the two Germanies during the Cold War era. In particular, its use of a shifting narrative perspective allows the novel to explore this relationship from a variety of different viewpoints. Moreover, as this analysis will show, the novel incorporates a number of allusions to Jewish themes and concerns, and thus also raises questions regarding the meaning of Jewish identity in East and West German society in the post-war era.

Borderline lives I: Liminality and transition

The novel gives voice to four individuals, each of whom tell of their experiences in the camp, their observations about other occupants and

their encounter with world outside the walls of the camp – and in many cases also with each other. The novel has four distinct narrators, three of whom are occupants of the camp. Nelly Senff is a single mother of two children who has left her home in East Berlin to escape the painful memories of life with her Russian partner, who disappeared in mysterious circumstances several years previously. Krystyna Jablonowska is a Polish cellist who sold her cello to pay for false papers in order to bring her gravely ill brother to the West to access medical treatment. Hans Pischke is an actor and long-term occupant of the refugee camp; a former political activist who was imprisoned for pouring red paint on the famous statue of Lenin at Leninplatz in East Berlin, he was ransomed by the West German government. The fourth narrator of the piece stands at the other side of the divide: John Bird, a black American secret service agent stationed at the Marienfelde camp, who is charged with deciding whether the refugees are suitable candidates for acceptance into the West or potential spies from the East who should be sent back. All four of these narrators have in common that they are outsiders, borderline figures who live in the in-between. Physically, temporally and emotionally, they are caught, confined, unable to move forward or backward and unable to accept the stasis of the present.

The refugee camp itself is of course the central emblem of the kind of liminality and transitoriness that pervades the characters' lives. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has engaged extensively with the notion of the camp throughout his oeuvre. In his seminal work, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Agamben looks back to the concentration camps of the Nazi era and uses them to analyse the status of internment camps more generally and their relationship to civil society. In exploring the motivation behind the creation of the camp, Agamben finds its position within the law to be fundamentally paradoxical. In that it is created by the law to contain undesirables, those deemed unworthy to live with the wider political community, who are divested of their civil rights and reduced to 'bare life', the camp is both within and beyond the terms of that law.¹¹ The occupants of the camp are caught in a liminal space, where their status is unclear and thus is perceived as threatening to the stability of the law. In Agamben's terms,

[w]hoever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made any sense.¹²

Although Agamben uses the concentration camps as his point of departure, he emphasises that the same is true of refugee camps and internment camps, or indeed any space where the normal order is suspended, ostensibly to protect the wider community.

The emergency reception camp at Marienfelde is presented in Franck's narrative as just such a paradoxical space. In spite of its location just west of the border, its occupants have not yet 'arrived' into the West; Marienfelde is thus intentionally and practically only a stop-gap on the way to somewhere else. In the in-between space of the refugee camp, they are effectively un-homed and stateless; they have no power over their own lives and must wait helplessly on the margins for their reintegration into society. As Nelly remarks to John, 'Zu jedem kommt eine Hand von oben und hebt ihn auf oder winkt ihm zu' (LF 225). The camp becomes thus, as Lyn Marven argues, 'an extension of the no-man's land, the inbetweenness of the border'.¹³ In a conversation with Nelly, Hans articulates his frustration with the limitations of their common situation:

Wir sind hier im Lager, nicht im Westen. [...] Du hast vielleicht den Osten verlassen. [...] Aber wo bist du gelandet? Ist dir nicht aufgefallen, daß wir in einem Lager wohnen mit einer Mauer drumherum, in einer Stadt mit einer Mauer drumherum, mitten in einem Land mit einer Mauer drumherum. Du meinst, hier drinnen, im Innern der Mauer, ist der goldene Westen, die große Freiheit?¹⁴

Hans's remarks also highlight the irony in the fact that he and Nelly ostensibly 'escaped' East Berlin only to find themselves effectively imprisoned in the West; the numerous walls that surround them underscore the boundaries that confine and shape their existence in West Berlin. Even John, who seems to be on the 'right' side of the camp wall – and the camp hierarchy – is trapped in his situation; he is desperate to get out of Berlin, to get a job with the CIA and be moved to a more important post in what he, like the camp internees, sees as the 'Außenwelt' (LF 235). For all four protagonists, then, the camp represents an interim space, which they occupy while they wait for the green light to move on to a better place.

The surroundings and furnishings of the camp serve only to emphasise its function as thoroughfare and preclude any possibility of laying down roots or setting up home. The furniture, which is identical in each of the apartments, is cheap, easily breakable and obviously only intended for short-term use. The graffiti on the wall beside Krystyna's

bed reminds her constantly that she is not the only one to have slept there – though for all its vulgarity and crudeness, the graffiti can also be seen as an attempt to personalise the space. The artificial candles that illuminate the Christmas tree at the party highlight the synthetic quality of that gathering also, with its vain attempt to artificially unite a group that does not come together by choice to celebrate but is rather thrown together by circumstance.

The occupants of the camp are physically separated from the outside world of West German society by a high wall topped with barbed wire; if they wish to leave the camp, they must pass through a security gate and present themselves to the security guard. Even when they are given the opportunity to integrate into West German society through work or school, they are socially excluded; their cheap clothes and shoes mark them as different. Krystyna is treated by the manager at the fast food restaurant where she works as stupid, slow, lazy and dishonest, even though her interaction with others in the novel would give us no reason to believe that this is the case. Nelly's children are teased in school for being 'Ostpocken' and 'Lagerkinder', for not having the same school bags as everyone else, and for not wearing the right clothes. At times, this social exclusion takes more insidious and more aggressive forms; on one occasion, Nelly's eight-year old son Aleksej is beaten so badly that he ends up in hospital. The doctor, falling prey to the same prejudice that brought about the child's injuries, leaves Nelly in no doubt that he believes that she is responsible for them.

In a temporal sense also, the characters are caught in a liminal phase between past and future – the past that they are desperate to shake off and a future that seems constantly beyond their grasp. They want to move forward and yet are unwilling or unable to let go of the lives they have left behind them in the East. Katharina Grätz points to the challenge posed by the borderline space: 'Als Orte des Übergangs sind Grenzen Zonen ungewisser Identität und ungeklärter Zugehörigkeit, Orte des "Nicht-Mehr" und "Noch-Nicht"'.¹⁵ In the liminal space of the camp, the protagonists are tied neither to the past nor to the future but are caught in the endless present.

In his book *Rites of Passage*, the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep describes the various stages involved when an individual or group goes through a period of change or transition in terms of separation, transition (liminal), and incorporation.¹⁶ Whilst the liminal phase of transition is a necessary and potentially even very productive stage in the journey towards a new status or identity,¹⁷ problems may

arise if the individual or group does not take the next step forward and re-enter society. During the liminal phase, the subject's former identity is erased, but since they have not yet attained their new status in society, they can become invisible or non-persons during the phase of transition.¹⁸

The narrators in *Lagerfeuer* seem caught in the liminal phase of their transition between East and West, past and present. Many of those who are lucky enough to have been granted permission to stay in West Germany are prevented by their limited economic means from moving out of the camp and making a home and a life for themselves in their new nation. This transitional phase without apparent end proves exhausting for some; as Grätz points out, 'Die Lagerexistenz mündet in den Zustand eines dauerhaften Provisoriums ein, das alle Lebensenergien und Zukunftshoffnungen absorbiert'.¹⁹ Hans is a case in point of one individual who seems to have lost both the will and the ability to move on. He has internalised the borderline nature of his existence to the extent that it has become a kind of comfort zone for him; for instance, Hans admits to Nelly that he has not left the camp in thirteen months. Furthermore, he has incorporated his status as a non-person to such a degree that it is as if he has emptied himself of meaning; if Nelly had opened the love letter he sent to her, she would have seen that it contained only a blank piece of paper (LF 204).

This effect of this permanent state of liminality is embodied most obviously in the figure of Krystyna, who is depicted as a grotesque personification of the split between past and present, origin and destination. She is portrayed wearing her mother's fur coat and a pair of rubber boots two sizes too big for her that she has been given by the clothing centre of the camp; Nelly also notices that she smells of 'eine strenge Mischung aus Fettgeruch und Parfum' (LF 178). This image of Krystyna in her fur coat and wellies and smelling of grease and perfume points simultaneously backwards and forwards, to what she was and what she has become, to a past life of relative comfort and affluence and to a future of functionality and limited means, but also both east and west, to Poland and West Germany. Her mismatched appearance reveals the tension of the present, as Krystyna, like the other internees, waits endlessly for her new life to begin.

The division at the centre of the transitional society also permeates life within the camp, and coupled with the camp occupants' frustration due to their powerlessness, it can at times lead to tension and even aggression. The camp residents tend to stick to their own groups of

friends and family, but occasionally they band together against another group or a certain individual. The German camp residents curse the Polish as ‘Polacken’ (LF 130) and ‘Zigeuner’ (LF 126), the older women accuse the younger women of being prostitutes, and all of the camp occupants suspect each other of spying. Hans becomes the victim of the other residents’ frustration when some of them, who have heard a rumour that he is a Stasi spy, beat him severely.

The novel does suggest subtle strategies by means of which the camp occupants begin to make steps towards extracting themselves from their liminal situation and making a new life in the West. For instance, the residents attempt to belong by imitating the Westerners with whom they come into contact through school or work. Like a form of mimicry or camouflage, they seek to be part of the wider collective beyond the walls of the camp by trying to *seem* as though they are like them. In post-war West German society, this form of belonging inevitably involves belongings: Nelly’s children implore their mother to buy them the same stickers and schoolbags as their classmates, and Krystyna seeks to blend in with her co-workers in the fast-food restaurant where she works by using the same deodorant and buying the same cheap make-up. Whilst these products themselves are of course not enough to make the camp residents appear to fit in, they mark the first steps in a long process. The success of these strategies is demonstrated in the fact that Krystyna is the only one of the four narrators who does manage to move forward and extricate herself both emotionally and physically from the present in which she has been trapped in the camp. Emboldened by her first steps towards being like the female workmates she so admires, she packs her suitcase and leaves the camp.

Borderline lives II: Surveillance and power

In her recent analysis of Julia Franck’s work, Beret Norman points to the importance of the notion of surveillance across a broad spectrum of the writer’s texts. She uses the concept of ‘gendered surveillance’ as a means of exploring the hierarchies that exist between characters in the narratives. As she points out, ‘Franck employs women watching men and men watching women, resulting in unexpected shifts in power dynamics’.²⁰ The notion of surveillance is central to *Lagerfeuer* and, as will be discussed below, it is reflected in both the content and the form of the novel. Seeing and being seen are crucial concepts in this narrative,

and the question of perspective is fundamental to an understanding of the power relationships at work in the refugee camp. Furthermore, as Norman rightly points out, there is a gendered aspect to the question of surveillance – one that in this particular text poses a challenge to the conventional hierarchy between the sexes.

The question of surveillance is immediately brought into play by the political background depicted in this narrative. In that most of the occupants of the Marienfelde camp have recently left the GDR, a state that ensured through its massive and repressive 'Ministerium for Staatssicherheit' that every aspect of its citizens' lives was subject to scrutiny, the question of state surveillance is a background theme from the outset. However, the novel makes it clear that in the refugee camp also, those recently arrived from the East are subject to close observation at all times. When Nelly is interrogated by secret service agents during her first weeks in the camp, she points explicitly to the similarity in approach: 'Ihr Kollege hat gestern viel Zeit mit der Frage nach Namen verschwendet. Ich möchte keine Namen nennen. Sie behandeln mich wie die Staatssicherheit. Namen, Namen, Namen' (LF 101).

It is worth mentioning that surveillance is a standard practice in a situation such as that of the refugee camp, where the authorities must assess whether or not to grant citizenship to an individual applicant. Indeed, surveillance is part and parcel of the experience of crossing a national border; when we travel to another country, we must identify ourselves either by means of a passport or in some cases through biometric means; we must justify our reasons for crossing into that country; and all the while we are watched from every angle by security cameras. Surveillance is inextricably bound to the experience of borders, and this is usually linked to the state's right to protect its sovereignty through promoting security.²¹ Security measures such as surveillance are a reaction to the perceived insecurity of borderline experiences, and as such, can reveal much about society's anxieties. Agamben suggests that migrants, exiles and refugees pose a problem to the state's attempts to protect itself, not so much because of any actual threat that they might represent, but because they call into question the validity of markers of national identity:

If refugees [...] represent such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state, this is above all because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality*, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis.²²

Deprived of their citizenship and denied their civil rights, however temporarily, migrants occupy a liminal space beyond the reach of the law, and therefore they represent a challenge to its power. Thus, practices of surveillance, which are intended to enforce the power of the law, can actually serve to undermine that power by exposing the anxieties that motivate them.

Paradoxically, practices of surveillance, themselves the product of anxiety, can also engender specific and significant psychosocial reactions in the collective. As Torin Monahan points out, security measures can actually have the effect of producing insecurity in the populace; 'Scholars have found, for instance, that the presence of surveillance cameras can generate experiences of fear in people who presume there must be a discernible threat to which the cameras are responding'.²³ He describes the knock-on effect of this as follows:

Fear and perceptions of insecurity colonize life worlds and spread virally, spawning paranoia, and motivating hypervigilance and self-regulation. On the level of lived experience, the social construction of fear is much more than just an instrumental exercise of power over people. Through it, people mold their identities and situate themselves in relation to others, whether through acts and discourses of solidarity or exclusion.²⁴

The insecurity and paranoia mentioned here are evident in *Lagerfeuer* in the behaviour of the camp residents and their interaction with each other. They reflect the manner in which they are watched by watching each other, and they are constantly aware of how their actions might appear to others. Hans watches Nelly from behind his curtains in the same way that John watches her from behind the observation windows of the interrogation room. Krystyna is constantly aware of how she is perceived by others; she listens to children talking to each other on the bus and pricks up her ears when she hears them mention 'die Alte', realising that they mean her (LF 50). However, more than any of the other characters, it is Hans who has internalised the insecurity provoked by constant surveillance. Hans's paranoia that he is being spied upon is so acute that he is constantly concerned that someone might enter his room while he is out:

Ich wußte, daß sie immer noch da waren, die Spione, gewiß nicht mehr so zahlreich wie in den fünfziger Jahren, aber immerhin genügend, um einen von ihnen unsere Wohnung beobachten zu lassen, in die Wohnung

schleichen, das Schloß abmontieren, Briefe und Notizbücher inspizieren zu lassen oder mit kleinen Kameras fotografisch festzuhalten. (LF 136)

Given Hans's fear of being spied upon, it is all the more ironic that he is beaten up by the other camp residents, who fear that he is a spy.

The fact that the anxiety provoked by constant surveillance of the camp is not limited to the camp occupants lends credence to Agamben's argument that the liminal status of the camp poses a threat to the systems of power that have created it. John, too, is conscious that he is being watched; he is careful not to be seen speaking to Nelly within the walls of the camp for fear that it might give the wrong impression and thereby compromise his chance of being accepted into the CIA. Nelly's apparent indifference to John's position and ostensible power over her fate mark a sharp contrast to his edginess in her presence. Their divergent reactions to the surveillance that is a part of their daily lives indicate on the one hand that there is no clear division between surveyor and surveyee and on the other, they call into question the power of those in charge.

The shifting narrative perspective, which allows for multiple viewpoints on the same scene, plays a crucial role in reinforcing the theme of surveillance in the novel. In telling their versions of events, the protagonists also refer to encounters with each other, and we sometimes get two or more different views on the same person or scene. On some occasions, the various different perspectives overlap, such as in the aforementioned observation of Nelly by the two male narrators, and on others they contradict each other. What Hans remembers of an encounter with Nelly is not necessarily the same as what she remembers of their meeting; Hans takes himself so seriously, but seen from Nelly's perspective, he comes across as pathetic. In addition, the fact that we are given insight into the various different narrators' thoughts allows us to see that on many occasions, the characters' impressions of situations and of each other are quite wrong.

The focus on watching and being watched is also reflected in the characters' assessment of each other, and this is portrayed both in gendered terms and through the lens of the power relations between the characters. Appearance plays a central role in their descriptions, but it is noteworthy that appearances are also presented as deceptive and misleading. John Bird's physical strength belies his weak role vis-à-vis his wife and his insecure position within the secret service. By contrast, Nelly is frequently perceived by others as being defenceless and

vulnerable; she is often depicted in a light cotton dress that cannot protect her from the driving rain, and her status as a single mother prompts others to want to step in and help her. Yet the chapters written from her perspective reveal her to be a very strong, determined woman. The affair that develops between John and Nelly thus does not run as one might expect; it is very much Nelly who dictates the terms of their liaison. In this way, the relationship provides a space where Nelly can overturn the traditional hierarchy between the sexes as well as the hierarchy that exists between them in the world of the camp.²⁵

It is important to note that the two female protagonists are described in very physical terms, which reinforces the validity of Beret Norman's idea of 'gendered surveillance'.²⁶ Throughout the narrative, continuous references are made to Nelly's beauty. Both of the male narrators are attracted to her, as are virtually all of the men who come into contact with her in her move from East to West. The attitude of the various men who watch her in the camp borders on the voyeuristic; however, the fact that Nelly generally pays no heed to their desire destabilises the power of the male gaze in this instance. By contrast, Krystyna is described from the outset as 'ein dickes Mädchen' (LF 53). The pretty young girls she comes into contact with at work, as well as the beautiful models that fill the pages of the glossy magazines that she loves to read, serve as a constant reminder to her that she cannot live up to that image. It is interesting that Nelly's children seem able to look beyond her appearance and see the person she once was; 'Im Innern hört sie Musik', is Aleksey's insightful description of the former cellist (LF 192). Krystyna is presented by the other characters, particularly her father, as being lazy and immobile, and thus it is all the more ironic when she packs her bags and leaves him in the camp.

Although Franck's depiction of surveillance and its effects are presented here in terms of the former GDR and the mutual mistrust of the superpowers during the Cold War era, there can be no doubt that its message has, if anything, a more potent significance for present-day society.²⁷ If anything, the advent of the internet and the increased power of the media since the 1970s have exposed us to a level of surveillance such that we have never experienced before. Whether we are browsing the internet, using a mobile phone or a credit card, this information is monitored, analysed, stored electronically and used to create an electronic profile of our habits, behaviours and interests as consumers. David Lyon describes this progression in stark terms: 'Because of the widespread, systematic and routine ways in which personal data are

processed in the twenty-first century, it is appropriate to talk of the “surveillance society”.²⁸ Clearly, the criticism of surveillance implied in this novel also taps into contemporary concerns about the erosion of the borders between private and public in this media-driven age.

Jewish Identity on the Border between Past and Present

The novel’s focus on a camp and its occupants – and the highlighting of this fact in its title – inevitably provokes associations with the Nazi era and raises the question of the extent to which the novel speaks to tendencies in contemporary German literature, particularly the reflection on the lessons to be learned from the past. Indeed, the very fact that a German-Jewish writer would set her novel in a camp is striking, and it triggers obvious questions about whether and in what way Franck intends for it to be read as a contribution to broader discussions about what it means to be Jewish in Germany today.

Like many contemporary German-speaking Jewish writers, Franck is reluctant to identify herself clearly in terms of her Jewish origins: ‘Ich bin keine Jüdin im gläubigen Sinn, aber ich bin auch nicht Nicht-Jüdin’, is her ambiguous take on this aspect of her heritage.²⁹ Nevertheless, there are a number of elements to this novel that mark its contribution to wider debates about Jewish identity in Germany today. The increased focus on German-language Jewish literature in recent years is due in part to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the division of Germany in 1989, an event which drew a line under the German post-war period and allowed for new forms of Jewish literature to emerge.³⁰ Linked in part to contemporary discussions about the concept of *Heimat* and the meaning of what it means to be German in a post-Wende era, there is also a general recognition that ‘the relationship between Germans and Jews [...] continues to be an essential ingredient in *any* notion of German identity’.³¹

Franck’s *Lagerfeuer* raises some interesting questions about the extent to which contemporary German society has moved beyond the vision of the Jew as other. One character more than any other in the novel is marked as different and isolated for her difference: Nelly, who is the only Jewish character in the novel. In East Germany, Nelly is treated with the kind of fascination normally reserved for a rare specimen in a museum; ‘Gibt’s doch gar nicht ... gar nicht mehr’, one of the border guards remarks when he hears that she is Jewish (LF 19). In the West

also, Nelly's Jewish background causes her to be treated with suspicion; the Western secret service agents who quiz her about her past find it difficult to relate to her claim that her Judaism was reason enough for the Stasi to leave her alone (LF 75). Nelly's treatment on both sides of the border sends a clear message that anti-Semitism still exists in both Germanies in the late 1970s. However, a number of more subtle and complex references to the Jewish faith and culture emphasise more clearly the extent to which this novel speaks to contemporary discourses of German Jewish identity.

To begin with, the title of the novel immediately calls to mind the Nazi death-camps; in post-war German culture, the word 'Lager' is forever tainted by the link to the concentration camps. Indeed, although Agamben is resolute in his assertion that the camp 'not as a historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past [...] but in some way as the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living', it is the concentration camps of the Nazi era that are the point of departure for his analysis of the camp situation.³² Juxtaposed with the word 'Lager', the 'Feuer' referred to in the novel's title recall the fires of the crematoria in Auschwitz and other death camps, which have gained iconic status through the art and poetry of camp survivors. The title of Franck's narrative thus calls to mind Holocaust memoirs such as those by Elie Wiesel and Italian writer Primo Levi; it is noteworthy in this context that Levi used the German word 'Lager' throughout his work to denote the concentration camp at Auschwitz.³³ Whether or not the author intends for her novel to be compared with the memoirs of Jewish survivors of the concentration camps, there can be little doubt that she must have been conscious of the undertones of its provocative title. Indeed, the association of the Marienfelde camp with the Nazi concentration camps invoked by the book's title is one that is borne out by the narrative itself. Although the humble conditions in which the occupants at Marienfelde live do not come close to the deplorable circumstances of the Nazi death camps, neither does the camp offer them the freedom, protection and contentment they seek. Instead, their freedom is severely curtailed and they are treated with suspicion, mistrust and derision. The comparison between the two different types of camp is made most clear when Nelly explains that her uncle, who is in Berlin on business, is not keen to visit her in Marienfelde; 'Er ist ins Exil gegangen', she explains, 'und hat seine Vorstellung von den Deutschen und ihren Lagern' (LF 270). The conflation of the Marienfelde refugee camp with the Nazi concentration camps in the jarring phrase 'd[ie]

Deutschen und ihre[...] Lager[...]’ indicates that the Holocaust still casts a powerful shadow over Nelly and her Jewish relatives; as Katharina Grätz remarks, ‘im aktuellen Schicksal Nellys [scheint] das Schicksal ihrer im Dritten Reich verfolgten Familie fortzusetzen’.³⁴

The name of Nelly Senff, the only Jewish character in the novel, also merits some attention. Its similarity to the name of Nelly Sachs, the German-Jewish poet and dramatist famed for her poems about life and death in the concentration camps, is striking. One of Sachs’s most famous poems, ‘O die Schornsteine’ (1947), features the line ‘Und Israels Leib im Rauch durch die Luft!’ and deals with the same issue hinted at in the word-play in the title of *Lagerfeuer*, namely the burning of Jewish bodies in the death camps. When Sachs was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1966 – the first Jewish woman to have received the award – she famously observed, ‘I represent the tragedy of the Jewish people’.³⁵ The subtle comparison made between the novel’s protagonist and this famous German Jewish writer implies that Nelly Senff too represents the wider Jewish collective, and furthermore, that there are other parallels in their situations: a common history of persecution and anti-Semitism that left them with no other option than to leave their homelands and look for refuge in other countries, and a similar experience of exile. In the fact that Nelly Senff is discriminated against for her Jewish origins in the late 1970s and in both East and West Germany, the novel sends a strong message regarding the latent anti-Semitism in contemporary German society.

Interestingly, although there is no evidence to suggest that Nelly Senff identifies herself in terms of her Jewish heritage, and despite her insistence in the novel that there is no sense of unity in the refugee camp – she maintains that the ‘Wir’ of its occupants is always only a ‘Wir Vereinzelter’ (LF 225) –, she does reveal an affinity to a broader Jewish collective, although the circumstances in which this admission is made are unusual and even somewhat amusing. Throughout the narrative, the tune of Boney M’s hit single ‘Rivers of Babylon’ serves as the background music for significant events that are all connected in some way with Nelly. This is the song that is playing on the radio when she and her children cross the border to begin their new life in the West; when Nelly’s son is beaten up by some classmates for being an ‘Ostpocke’, she is irritated to hear her daughter humming the tune; and it is the music playing on the radio alarm clock that interrupts her conversation with John after they have had sex for the first time. Apart from highlighting a historically specific period – the single by the

German-based Jamaican pop group was the best-selling single in Germany for seventeen weeks between April and August 1978 – ‘Rivers of Babylon’ also serves as a pointer to the subtext of Jewish subjugation and transcendental homelessness, as the following lines illustrate:

By the rivers of Babylon
 Where we sat down
 Yeah, we wept
 When we remembered Zion.

The song is based on the first four verses of Psalm 137 of the Old Testament, where the anonymous Hebrew psalmist describes the atrocities carried out against the Jewish people during their exile in Babylon and their longing to return to their ancestral home of Jerusalem.³⁶ The fact that the song evokes such a strong reaction in Nelly suggests that its subject matter touches a raw nerve with her. She loses her temper with her daughter, berating her, ‘sei still, Katja, hör auf, dieses Lied zu summen, ich kann das nicht mehr hören, überall, wo man ist, wird dieses Lied gespielt’ (LF 171-2). When John questions her about her annoyance and her criticism of the song as a ‘falsches Lied’, she justifies it by insisting that no-one actually understands what the popular song is about: ‘Wer von denen hat schon um Zion geweint. So ein Lied verspottet uns’ (LF 229). Despite Nelly’s insistence that there is no group, only individuals, her emotional reaction and her use of the word ‘uns’ here reveal her identification with the Jews in the song. The humiliation and degradation they suffer in Babylon, and their longing for a place to call home serve as a reminder that she has not escaped her Jewish heritage. In addition, the fact that the German public fails to grasp the song implies that contemporary West Germany has no comprehension of what it means to be a Jew.

As a contribution to contemporary debates on the meaning of German-Jewish identity, *Lagerfeuer* does not present a particularly positive image of the relationship between the Germans and the Jews. It suggests that anti-Semitism is not something that can easily be relegated to the past, and that the persecution of the Jewish people over the centuries still plays a role both in how they see themselves and in how they are seen by others. Neither does it present a solution to this dilemma. Rather, in Nelly’s recognition that she cannot overlook this crucial aspect of her heritage and that she does, by dint of her Jewish ancestry, belong to a collective with a long history, the novel makes a case for the acceptance of Jewish identity as an integral part of German identity.

Conclusion

The focus in *Lagerfeuer* on the frontier between East and West Germany raises a number of important questions about the relationship between the two Germanies during the Cold War era. The perspectives of four peripheral individuals, who live on the fringes of society, undermine conventional narratives of escape from the oppressive East and welcome into the 'Golden West'. Franck's fictional account of the Marienfelde refugee camp reveals the reality of border crossing to be a lot more complex than conventional models of the division between East and West would imply. Her depiction of the despair and insecurity integral to life in the camp suggests that suspicion, mistrust, and prejudice existed on both sides of the Berlin Wall. Her representation of the move from one side of the border to the other reveals more similarities than differences, and thus her novel both supplements and challenges the master narrative of West German history of this era.

Moreover, *Lagerfeuer* reflects on a number of concerns that are perhaps especially relevant for the contemporary reader. Issues of belonging and separation, integration and exclusion are very much to the forefront of contemporary debates about what it means to be German in a post-Wende era. In particular, the question of German-Jewish identity, which is explored in Franck's narrative, is one that still remains unresolved. Furthermore, the topic of surveillance and its potential effect on the individual and on society has a broad-reaching impact in a today's world, where new media and communications technologies mean that every aspect of our personal lives is under observation. The object of Franck's enquiry, the refugee camp at Marienfelde, may today be obsolete, but the concerns raised in her novel are still as pertinent today as in the late 1970s.

Notes

¹ Volker Hage, 'Ganz schön abgedreht', *Der Spiegel*, 12 (1999), 244-6, (here 245). Although Franck was not mentioned by name in Hage's article, she was often depicted by the media as being one of these 'wonder girls'. Franck speaks out very strongly against the idea of the 'Frauleinwunder' in an essay entitled 'Das Wunder Frau', *Women in German Yearbook* 24 (2008), 229-35.

² Among the English translations of Franck's work are her novel *Die Mittagsfrau*, which was translated into English by Anthea Bell and published in

the UK as *The Blind Side of the Heart*, London: Random House, 2009 and in the USA as *The Blindness of the Heart*, New York: Grove Press, 2010. A short story entitled 'Der Hausfreund' from the collection *Bauchlandung* (2000), translated by Lyn Marven as 'Family Friend', is included in the following volume: Helen Constantine, ed., *Berlin Tales*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 81-94.

³ Franck's approach has been compared to the work of the microhistorian, who focuses his/her attention on outsiders and their interaction with the wider community in order to construct a fuller and more inclusive image of a historical era. See for example Stacey Knecht, 'Interview with Julia Franck', *The Ledge*, an independent platform for world literature. Available at: <http://www.theledge.com/HTML/conversation.php?ID=28&lan=uk> (accessed 6 September 2012).

⁴ For an analysis of the microhistorical approach used in that novel see Valerie Heffernan, 'Matria history and the Matrilineal Narrative. Julia Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau*', in Lyn Marven and Stuart Taberner, eds, *Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century*, Studies in German Literature, Linguistic and Culture, Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011, pp. 148-61.

⁵ On the concept of 'history from below', see Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 'Social History - Cultural History - Alltagsgeschichte - Microhistory: In-Between Methodologies and Conceptual Frameworks', *Journal of Microhistory* (2006), available on <http://www.microhistory.org/pivot/entry.php?id=20> (accessed 10 September 2011).

⁶ Further information on the history of the Marienfelde refugee camp can be found on the website of the Marienfelde Refugee Centre Museum at: <http://www.notaufnahmelager-berlin.de> (accessed 6 September 2012).

⁷ Julia Franck, 'Die Überwindung der Grenze liegt im Erzählen. Eine Einladung', in: *Grenzübergänge. Autoren aus Ost und West erinnern sich*, ed. by Julia Franck, Frankfurt: Fischer, 2009, pp. 9-22, (here: p. 11).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹¹ Agamben's concept of 'bare life' is one that he introduces in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and develops in *State of Exception* (2005). He is concerned with the ways in which at times of political crisis or emergency,

governments have the power to declare a 'state of exception' and suspend civil rights, thereby reducing human beings to 'bare life'. Underlying all of Agamben's work in this area is a concern that the 'state of exception' is becoming increasingly commonplace. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998 and *State of Exception*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

¹² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 97.

¹³ Lyn Marven, 'Divided City, Divided Heaven? Berlin Border Crossings in Post-Wende Fiction', in Philip Broadbent and Sabine Hake, eds, *Berlin Divided City, 1945-1989*, New York: Berghahn, 2010, pp. 184-93, (here: p. 188).

¹⁴ Julia Franck, *Lagerfeuer*, Munich: DTV, 2005, p. 275. All further references to the novel will be given in parentheses after the quotation in the body of the text in the form (LF page number).

¹⁵ Katharina Grätz, 'Das Andere hinter der Mauer. Retrospektive Grenzkonstruktion und Grenzüberschreitung in Julia Francks *Lagerfeuer* und Wolfgang Hilbig's *Das Provisorium*', in Barbara Beßlich, Katharina Grätz and Olaf Hildebrand, eds, *Wende des Erinnerns? Geschichtskonstruktionen in der deutschen Literatur nach 1989*, Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2006, pp. 243-57, (here: p. 244).

¹⁶ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1977, p. 21.

¹⁷ Linda Shortt's chapter in this volume explores this productive aspect of the liminal state, as she analyses the concept of waiting in Eleonora Hummel's work.

¹⁸ Victor Witter Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1967, p. 97.

¹⁹ Katharina Grätz, 'Das Andere hinter der Mauer', p. 250.

²⁰ Beret Norman, 'Social Alienation and Gendered Surveillance: Julia Frank observes Post-Wende Society', in: Katharina Gerstenberger and Patricia Herminhouse, eds, *German Literature in a New Century. Trends, Traditions, Transitions, Transformations*, New York: Berghahn, 2008, pp. 237-52, (here: p. 238).

²¹ Torin Monahan, 'Introduction: Constructing Insecurity', in *Surveillance in the Time of Insecurity*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 1-12, (here: p. 6).

²² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 77. Italics in original.

²³ Monahan, 'Introduction: Constructing Insecurity', p. 3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ M. Loreto Vilar Panella describes that hierarchy as follows: 'So unversöhnlich sind ihre beide Positionen, die nur zufälligerweise mit Ost und West identifiziert werden: Flüchtling und CIA-Agent stehen hier vielmehr für Machtlosigkeit und Machtbesessenheit auf supranationaler Ebene.' 'Utopieverlust vs. Utopielosigkeit in der Literatur: Julia Francks Notaufnahmehagerfeuer', in: Cristina Jarillot Rodal, ed., *Bestandaufnahme der Germanistik in Spanien. Kulturtransfer und methodologische Erneuerung*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 347-56, (here: p. 355).

²⁶ Beret Norman, 'Social Alienation and Gendered Surveillance'.

²⁷ Beret Norman makes a similar point: 'By providing pointed references to the use of surveillance in the Cold War in *Lagerfeuer*, [...] Franck points to the problem of privacy and power in contemporary society.' Norman, 'Social Alienation and Gendered Surveillance', p. 238.

²⁸ David Lyon, *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*, Cambridge: Polity, 2007, p. 7.

²⁹ Heike Geilen, 'Julia Franck: "Die Mittagsfrau"', in *Sandammeer. Literaturzeitschrift im Internet*, 11/2007, available at: <http://www.sandammeer.at/rezensionen/franck-mittagsfrau.htm> (accessed 6 September 2012).

³⁰ See for example Hillary Hope Herzog, Todd Herzog and Benjamin Lapp, eds, *Rebirth of a Culture. Jewish Identity and Jewish Writing in Germany and Austria today*, New York: Berghahn, 2009.

³¹ Leslie A. Adelson, 'There's No Place Like Home: Jeannette Lander and Ronnith Neumann's Utopian Quests for Jewish Identity in the Contemporary West German Context', in *New German Critique*, 50 (1990), 113-34, (here 113).

³² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 95.

³³ See for example Primo Levi's famous memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, translated by Stuart Woolf, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958.

³⁴ Katharina Grätz, 'Das Andere hinter der Mauer', p. 251-2.

³⁵ Rachel S. Harris, 'Holocaust Literature: Poetry', in Judith R. Baskin, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 243-4, (here: p. 243).

³⁶ John E. McFadyen, 'The Messages of the Psalms: Psalm 137', in: *The Biblical World* 26/2 (1905), 96-100, (here 97). On the meaning of Jerusalem for exiled Jews, see also Peter Riddell, 'Jerusalem in history: the city of peace?' in: *Evangelical Quarterly* 78/3 (2006), 209-19, (here 210).