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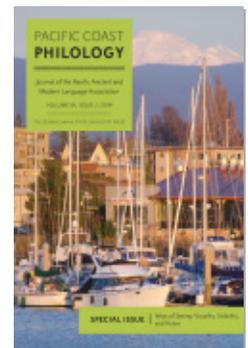
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## Fürstenfelde and Unterleuten: Two Literary German Villages and Their Digital Representations

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# *Fürstenfelde and Unterleuten*



## Two Literary German Villages and Their Digital Representations

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**Abstract:** While villages face the threats posed by rapid change, real and fictional villages in German-speaking countries have recently gained visibility through cultural and literary representations. Starting from these considerations, this article explores Saša Stanišić’s *Before the Feast* and Juli Zeh’s *Unterleuten*, two successful novels, each featuring a post-socialist Brandenburg village as its location. By investigating the two novels and the websites named after them, *fürstenfelde.de* and *unterleuten.de*, the article shows how these works, originally conceived for print, open up to visual experimentation, and how their digital visualizations complicate the tensions between closure and openness, past and present, and facts and fiction that frame village tales in general, and these village narratives in particular. In partaking in the dynamics of the virtual world, fictional village stories receive new visibility and allow the narration to continue beyond the printed page, in digital spaces where the role of literature is renegotiated. In dialogue with scholarship on literature in the digital age and on German village literature, this article ultimately examines the importance of digital visualization as one of the multiple manifestations of the new German village, both as a narrative space and as a venue for the refashioning of literary and creative traditions.

**Keywords:** village, visual representation, contemporary German novel, Stanišić, Zeh

In 2012, Hallstatt, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Austria, made news as the “World’s First Cloned Village” (Laylin), when its duplicate was built in China. Tourists could now decide to visit “one of Austria’s most picturesque villages”

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(Wu) in its original Alpine location, which dates back to prehistoric times, or admire its newer copy in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong.<sup>1</sup> This event, which initially caused outrage and resentment in the Austrian community of nine hundred people, later became a way to celebrate the real Hallstatt. As the tourist page of the village proclaims: “Hallstatt—Das Original. Millionenfach fotografiert—einmal kopiert—nie erreicht” (Hallstatt—The Original. Photographed a million times—copied once—never paralleled).<sup>2</sup> Feelings of anger aside, the cloning of a seven-thousand-year-old village raises questions about the significance of replica, the representation of the original space in a new setting, and of the new visibility that comes with them. The two versions of Hallstatt will inevitably differ, but the process of duplication directs our attention to the multiplying representations of this Austrian village. Villages have become increasingly popular in recent German-language culture and literature, and the interest in Hallstatt finds its parallel in the fascination with region and regionality that continues to inform the conversation about literary, filmic, and visual works produced in German-speaking countries. *Tatort*, the most successful German police procedural television series, first aired in the 1970s, plays both in big cities and small towns and villages, which add “local color” to the crime stories.<sup>3</sup> Winden, a small, fictional town located next to a towering power plant, features in *Dark* (2017), the first German TV series produced by Netflix for an international audience. Finally, a number of recent German-language novels, such as Veia Kaiser’s *Blasmusikpop oder Wie die Wissenschaft in die Berge kam* (2012), Robert Seethaler’s *Ein ganzes Leben* (2014), and Katrin Seddig’s *Das Dorf* (2017), foreground Austrian and German villages as their locations.

The increased visibility of the village and its stories has sparked the interest of critics and scholars, who have responded to the diverse cultural, literary, and filmic portrayals of the province by relating the new interest in “scenic” locations to the long tradition of regional fiction and village prose. In this regard, the project “Experimentierfeld Dorf,” led by a cluster of German scholars, explores the village as a social, political, literary, and filmic entity, and has resulted in the book series “Rurale Topografien.” In the preface to the edited volume *Imaginäre Dörfer: Zur Wiederkehr des Dörflichen in Literatur, Film und Lebenswelt*, which inaugurated the series in 2014, Nell and Weiland remark, “Das Dorf boomt und die Dörfer sterben” (“The village” is booming and the villages are dying). Villages may be shrinking or disappearing, but the village thrives as a literary space of historical projections, cultural memories, and personal and collective stories. As villages face the threats posed by rapid change, recent village novels experiment with different representational modes, balancing literary tradition and contemporary innovation, which includes the creation of websites that visualize and recreate the villages depicted in the

novels. Starting from these considerations, my article explores Saša Stanišić's *Before the Feast* (originally published as *Vor dem Fest* in 2014) and Juli Zeh's *Unterleuten* (2016), two successful novels, each featuring a post-socialist Brandenburg village as its location. The fact that the villages became the protagonists of two websites named after them—*fürstenfelde.de* and *unterleuten.de*—invites closer considerations on the projects they pursue. By exploring the two novels and their digital representations, I show how these works, originally conceived for print, open up to visual experimentation, and how their digital visualizations complicate the projects of the novels. In particular, this essay argues that the digital visualization recasts and complicates the relation between facts and fiction, past and present, and closure and openness that frames village tales in general, and these village narratives in particular. In partaking in the dynamics of the virtual world, village stories receive new visibility and allow the narration to continue beyond the printed page, entering new spaces that re-actualize the village narrative in the context of contemporary literature. In dialogue with scholarship on literature in the digital age, on the one hand, and village literature on the other, this essay ultimately examines the importance of digital visualization as one of the multiple manifestations of the new German village, both as a narrative space and as a venue for the refashioning of traditions.

## Literature in the Digital Age

*Before the Feast*, *Unterleuten*, and their accompanying websites partake of phenomena that characterize literature in the digital age. While e-literature is created and developed for the digital space, texts traditionally conceived for print are made available also in digital formats or are expanded through digital components. The digital distribution of literature initially instilled the fear for the “death of the book”—which academic debates have addressed since the early 1990s (Murray 1)—but the discussion has now expanded to reflect on the affordances that the digital environment offers to literature and its writers. The appearance of literary works as digital and audible narration contributes to the redefinition of the spaces and possibilities literature has at its disposal, as well of the audiences it can reach. In his essay “Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon,” Mark McGurl describes a literary industry dominated by new dynamics, which spread from the world of e-commerce onto the processes of literature writing, publishing, and reading. As the production and consumption of literature merge with other experiences of “customer service,” readers-consumers can influence and interact with the literary creations through scrolling, clicking, and rating. In *Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction*, Adam Hammond points out,

No group is more sensitive to the changes inherent in the shift to digital forms than readers of literature. What the digital age has accomplished, above all else, is to defamiliarize the act of reading. It has done so by offering us choices. [. . .] As we shift back and forth between print and digital forms, reading becomes an increasingly self-conscious act. We study not only the words on the page or the screen but also the way that the medium itself seems to shape our reading. (4)

Digital or digitized literature invites readers to question and redefine traditional ways of reading as new media and forms affect their choices of how and what they read. Hammond considers interactivity as “the most recognizably innovative, potentially revolutionary, and intellectually intriguing of the born-digital affordances” (154). As readers start interacting with the digital text and its representational modes, they become agents that actively shape the process of reading. This “self-conscious act” results not only in new experiences in the consumption of literature, but also in a more active role and reduced distance between readers and the texts.

Literature in the digital age also engages in transformations that foreground the role of visuality, which plays a crucial role in many areas of contemporary culture. However, literary texts can create images in unique ways, which excite the imagination of the reader. Guido Isekenmeier and Ronja Bodola suggest that “literary visuality is the active participation of literature in visual culture, for literature is involved in the production of discourses as well as practices and artefacts that negotiate *and* (pre)configure visualities” (11). Indeed, literature already partakes in the practices of visualization, even when it does not contain any visual insertions. Descriptions help readers imagine characters and places, and actions give movements to these portraits. But with a new emphasis on moving images in popular and visual media and with the wide possibilities that the internet offers, literature is responding to some of these transformations by experimenting with the visual space of the internet.

The websites designed for *Before the Feast* and *Unterleuten* address these features and changes that scholars notice in relation to the digital world and visual media. The readers of the two novels create their own images of the villages and their inhabitants before “seeing” what their authors have imaged for them. But as they read, they probably experience the urge to find out whether the locations they read about exist in reality. If they turn to the internet, the top results will lead them to the websites under discussion in this article. Marketing and commercial decisions may lie behind these websites, which serve to promote the works, their authors, and the creative projects that sustain them. Indeed, as Simone Murray argues in her discussion of digital paratexts, in the space of the internet, the “creative and commercial interests have grown so intermeshed as to be practically indistinguishable” (173). But their existence in relation to

the printed novel has broader consequences, especially considering the genre of the village narrative, which traditionally focuses on the microcosm of the community. How do they affect the way in which the works of literature can be read? Do these websites, which combine visual representations, authorial posts, interviews, and book trailers, address a new community of uninformed visitors that can now follow the village and their narratives? Responding to the changes that result from visualization and digitization, *Before the Feast* and *Unterleuten* experiment with the tradition of the village tale by using the digital space to continue to tell the stories of the locations they describe. By simulating the movements toward visualization that the novels already encourage on the diegetic levels, their respective websites not only find new ways to market their products, but also allow new and old visitors to virtually explore the villages and the literary works that originally contain them.

### From the Village Tale to the Village Novel and Its Digital Representations

*Before the Feast* and *Unterleuten* foreground two contemporary representations of the German village but belong to a long tradition that goes back to the birth of the village tale (in German, *Dorfgeschichte*).<sup>4</sup> The genre of the *Dorfgeschichte* bloomed across Europe, in particular in Germany, France, and Switzerland, at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a response to two major sociohistorical changes: on the one hand, the emergence of the bourgeoisie and the consequent power loss of traditional institutions, and, on the other, industrialization. As Stefan Neuhaus shows, these two major changes also sharpened the contrast between city and countryside, which over time acquired different meanings and came to embody opposite possibilities and tensions (15).<sup>5</sup> With his *Schwarzwälder Dorfgeschichten*, published in 1842, Berthold Auerbach is credited as the father of the genre among German-speaking authors, but his literary endeavors mirror the interest of a key group of writers that include Jeremias Gotthelf (1779–1854), Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1797–1848), and Josef Rank (1816–96) (Donovan 97). While there is no one definition of the *Dorfgeschichte* that can capture its diverse manifestations, its earliest examples shared some distinguishing features. Traditionally set in the countryside, village tales foreground peasant characters and their lives, and hint at the opposition to life in the city. The focus on the microcosm of the village and its traditions explains the preference for short forms and the use of a realistic style to capture the regionality of the setting and its characters. By absorbing the struggles and ideals of the *Vormärz* (the period leading to the 1848 revolution), the *Dorfgeschichte* initially carried out a political function, which gradually weakened once the revolution failed.<sup>6</sup> A realistic genre with a

remarkable political focus for the budding German nation, from its inception the *Dorfgeschichte* offered the literary space to represent reality, depict the tension between past and modernity, and give voice to underrepresented groups. All these elements still inform the recent iterations of the village tale, which rethink and reshape the tradition of the genre.

It is no coincidence that regionalism and realism emerged together in the nineteenth century German-language village tale. The realistic turn toward a regionally defined reality can be understood in connection with the weakening of totalizing institutions on the one hand, and with emerging processes of industrialization on the other (Mecklenburg 71).<sup>7</sup> The desire to preserve local traditions and stories in the face of modernizing forces informed the projects of the writers of *Dorfgeschichten*, who were inspired by “Scott’s ethnographic approach” (Donovan 97). The literary interest in the village tale was echoed in legal historiography and anthropology, two areas of study that devoted increasing attention to this form of community (Twellmann 226–227). In their attempt to describe the regional particularities of the German territories, village tales renounced a pretense to totality and focused on realist details, which, however, also allowed for the idealization of the province (Mecklenburg 72). Indeed, the *Dorfgeschichte* combined realistic prose with the nostalgic and transfigured tones of the idyllic tradition. At the same time, the focus on historical and realistic details made the village tale, and later the village novel, less prone to the social critique that can be found in other literatures of the time, such as the Italian and English one (Mecklenburg 88–89).

From its inception, the village narrative reflected experiences of change and the ensuing tensions between traditional past and the modernizing forces of the “present.” Within this narrative, the village suggested the ideal return to untainted ways of living on the one hand, while, on the other, it stood in opposition to the realm of fantasy, which often coincided with the seductive space of the city (Gansel 203). Peasant life, the focus of the earliest village tales, was thus either praised by the critics of civilization as the purest form of life not compromised by progress and change, or it was regarded as an area for moral improvement by city dwellers. Writers of village tales narrated regional differences and their representatives, but, with the development of the *Heimat* literature and culture around 1890, the village tale became an essential part of the collective imagination that, combining poetic realism and emotional projections, worked to present a monolithic understanding of the homeland. As metropolitan life became the new norm, the village tale offered the literary space that guaranteed the stability of individual and national ideals, away from the anonymity of the city life and the dramatic changes, which the First World conflict exasperated. The resistance toward modernity favored

developments which emphasized the primitive refusal of the modern city life in the village tale and novel.

This tension between openness and closure characterizes both the village tale and the history of its genre. In *European Local-Color Literature: National Tales, Dorfgeschichten, Romans Champêtres*, Josephine Donovan discusses how the earliest village tales became a more inclusive space for stories that, up to that time, had remained mostly unheard. Indeed, the village tale “focused sympathetically on peasants or villagers as ethnic minorities, presenting their point of view, detailing their customs, representing their dialogue in dialect, and locating them in accurate historical time and geographical space” (100). The genre gave voice to its peasants-protagonists and, in so doing, continued its attempt to resist the “state-imposed modernity,” which focused on the “suppression and devaluation of ethnicity” (101). The village tale created the literary space for the lower classes, which became the protagonists of stories that combined realistic representations with caricatural portraits. This closure around the village would be later distorted and exploited by supporters of the *Blut und Boden* ideals (Blood and Soil), who appropriated the idea of the protective space of the village to promote the image of a racially unified provincial life fostered by ideals of Germanness, which suppressed the initial attempts of the genre to capture regional, ethnic, and social particularities. Drawing on Jürgen Hein, Donovan highlights how regional writers from previous times, especially if Jewish like Auerbach, were largely ignored and excluded from the later tradition of the German tale (103).<sup>8</sup> Because of this nationalistic development, regional literature and the village tale remained long tainted with suspicion, and the sense of community they supported became questionable. For this reason, while in West Germany and Austria, the tradition of the *Heimat* literature and film continued well into the 1950s and 1960s, it was paralleled by a flourishing of anti-*Heimat* literature, which tried to problematize and reconceptualize the idea of *Heimat* beyond its associations with National Socialism.

In the literature of reunified Germany the village tale and novel take new directions, which show how the genre works toward a recuperation and new understanding of regionalism and the province. As Carsten Gansel shows, first came the pop novels of the 1990s, in which life in the province was rediscovered as part of childhood and adolescence recollections from the former Federal Republic of Germany. In a second, more recent wave of village novels, younger protagonists return to the countryside to reconstruct the life of their families and of previous generations (Gansel 218–19). There is, finally, a group of village novels, which this article discusses, in which writers that are not originally part of the villages they describe position themselves

as “outsiders.” In *Before the Feast* and *Unterleuten*, the village is not explored as a space to which the narrator returns because of personal connections, but rather as the setting of a social and narrative experiment, a space to observe, narrate, and understand, while untangling his complex past history and its present. An outsider to the village community, the narrator unmask herself as a reporter in *Unterleuten*; alternatively, Stanišić entrusts the narration to the village itself, which tells its own story using the plural pronoun “we.” It is worth noticing that the two novels share their regional focus on semifictional Brandenburg villages whose socialist past affects present-day relations among the inhabitants. For example, people in Fürstentfelde still mistrust the former postman, who is known to have spied into people’s mail. In *Unterleuten*, the animosity between the two patriarchs of the village goes back to the times of divided Germany and the ways in which reunification and capitalism changed their professional and personal relationship. By foregrounding these geographic and political particularities of the village novel, *Before the Feast* and *Unterleuten* continue the regional focus of the original village tale, but engage with the political and historical specificities of their contexts.

By renouncing personal and generational attachment to the village story, these novels illustrate the attempt to turn the village and its narrative into the protagonists as they face the new demands and opportunities of modernity and globalization. While both villages position themselves in relation to the outside world, which threatens precarious balances and the village’s resistance to change, their authors play with their presence in the digital space. In his article “Schöne Dörfer: Themen und Tendenzen neuer Dorfgeschichten,” Marc Weiland reflects on the role of images and media in *Before the Feast* and comes to the conclusion that the novel stands “im Kontext einer Vielzahl neuerer literarischer Dorfgeschichten, die auch auf sich selbst in ihrer spezifischen Beobachterrolle verweisen und sich selbst als Dorfgeschichten ausstellen und vorführen” (the novel belongs to a multiplicity of new literary village tales, which also point to themselves in their specific role of observers, and which display and showcase themselves as village tales) (112). The multimedia representations of the contemporary German-language village novel respond to the self-referentiality that Weiland describes, but, at the same time, they allow for the continuation of the traditional *Dorfgeschichte* as it participates in different cultural and literary conversations that position the original village tale at the intersection of media spaces.

### *Before the Feast* and *Unterleuten* and Their Literary Villages

Saša Stanišić’s *Before the Feast* and Juli Zeh’s *Unterleuten* combine innovative forms with complex village dynamics, which expand the narrative boundaries

of traditional regional tales. Following Stanišić's first success *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* (*Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert*, 2006), *Before the Feast* transports its readers to Brandenburg and, in particular, to the rural region around the metropolitan area of Berlin. The novel, which received the Leipziger Book Prize in 2014, was celebrated by the jury as "ein Dorf aus Sprache erfunden, ein Kaleidoskop, einen Kosmos aus vielen Stimmen, Klangfarben, Jargons, die Welt in nuce" (a village invented through language, a kaleidoscope, a cosmos made up of many voices, tone colors, jargons, the world in a nutshell) ("Nominierungen und Preisträger 2014"). The focus on village life with its cultural and social identity distinguishes Stanišić's oeuvre, but *Before the Feast* lets the village of Fürstenfelde in the Uckermark emerge through narration.<sup>9</sup> By using a choral "we," the village speaks its present and past stories, allowing for a multiplicity of voices to come together in a collective one that represents different temporalities of the village history. Juli Zeh's novel *Unterleuten* renounces the plurality of the "we," favoring instead the individual perspectives of the village inhabitants.<sup>10</sup> By dedicating each chapter title to a single character of the novel, *Unterleuten* foregrounds the particular interests of the community members and the newcomers. The mutual rivalries and final hostilities turn this village narrative into a thriller, in which the presumed kidnapping of a child, different accidents, and mysterious deaths upset the inhabitants. By combining legal and criminal issues with the socio-political context of the province, *Unterleuten* shows how a contemporary village is not immune to the logic of investments and profits, as urban dynamics creep into the village and newcomers from the city attempt to establish their lives within this rural community.

In spite of their specificities, Fürstenfelde and Unterleuten share some village dynamics, which in both novels translate on the level of content and form. The relations between past and present, openness and closure, fact and fiction are relevant thematic and analytical categories in the discussion of the two village narratives and show how much the two works belong to a genre with a long literary history. While these stories capture the physical and metaphorical spaces within the village and outside of it, and the connections among residents and "intruders," they help explain the formal and narrative choices made to represent the villages and their complex stories. These categories can also help us understand how the two works become narrative experiments that are further developed in the digital spaces of their websites.

The present of both Fürstenfelde and Unterleuten can only be understood through their rich and, at times, obscure past. The GDR division still hovers in the two villages, together with the awareness of having been controlled by the state, which in part explains the tension between openness and closure and the mistrust toward newcomers. Furthermore, the friendships and rivalries

in the village go back to times marked not only by festive celebrations, but also by deaths and crimes. In *Before the Feast*, the more distant past returns to the village in the form of recollections and semi-historical chronicles spanning from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, which are inserted within the main narrative of the preparations for the feast. The language used in these accounts (which mimics Modern High German), the events narrated (ranging from marvelous, fairy-tale like stories to mundane, everyday events), and the fact that they constitute stand-alone episodes (marked as such by the year of the events), contribute to their identification as individual, semi-historical chronicles. These accounts also offer a parody of history by mixing atrocious events with magic episodes, which distract from the seriousness of realist descriptions. Originally cherished in the Homeland House of Fürstenfelde, these stories escape on the eve of the celebration, revealing how much Fürstenfelde's present is the product of past rituals, traditions, and tales, in which reality and fantasy merge. In *Unterleuten*, the interaction between present and past also inform the identity of the village, even though references to the past only focus on GDR times. The inhabitants are divided into the old generation, who has spent most of their life in Unterleuten and know it both in its past and its post-socialist present, and the newcomers, who only know the most recent dynamics of the village. Characters and events come together in an intricate system, which can be better understood in the light of key events that date back to 1991, when Kron and Gombrowski's rivalry first degenerated. Their enmity started at the time of the divided Germany, when Gombrowski decided to leave Kron's agriculture cooperative to build his own agrobusiness. But this past is also wrapped in mystery, as the amnesia of one of the characters betrays. For Schaller, a longtime resident of Unterleuten, past memories are trapped in "ein Irrgarten aus Trugbildern, in dem er sich rettungslos verlor. Die Vergangenheit war ein Ort, an dem der Wahnsinn wohnte" (a maze of delusions, in which he got lost hopelessly. The past was a place, in which madness lived) (349). Schaller's past, and by extension the past of the village, continues to haunt the characters, even though its contours are hard to read. The interconnections between past and present become more fluid on the websites dedicated to the two novels, where they come to coexist on a virtual space that defies the temporal boundaries and the final disclosures of the printed novel.

While both villages still grapple with their past, they also face significant changes in the present. *Before the Feast* depicts Fürstenfelde on the eve of the annual celebration of the Anna Feast.<sup>11</sup> The festive mood is tinged with melancholy, since the village is mourning the recent passing of the beloved ferryman, who was also the admired storyteller of Fürstenfelde: "We are sad. We don't have a ferryman any more" (1). This tragic event, along with the

dropping birth rate, foreshadows the slow disappearance of Fürstenfelde. The narrative voice tries to cast out the shrinking of the village by proclaiming: “We’ve survived pestilence and war, epidemics and famine, life and death. Somehow or other things will go on” (3). And indeed, the fervent preparations for the festival dissipate part of the sadness. The hope for the continuation of the village and its stories lies in Frau Kranz, who since 1945 “has been painting exclusively Fürstenfelde and its surroundings” (53). The ninety-year-old painter functions as the cohesive force of the village, which she immortalizes in the painting that she donates for the auction at the celebration.<sup>12</sup> This visual representation of the village is narrated in the novel through an ekphrastic description which takes up the whole last chapter in the novel. Both deceased and alive characters are captured in this painting, which visualizes the plural “we” that has accompanied the reader throughout the novel. This first visual rendering of the village leads the way to the digital visualization of Fürstenfelde and its story on the website curated by its author. As if the stories told in and about the village were not enough to preserve it, the images created in the novel and on the materials posted on the website continue the conversation about Fürstenfelde.

Changes also unsettle Unterleuten, a fictional village of 250 inhabitants, located in the Prignitz district in northwestern Brandenburg, where new opportunities clash with past animosities. As Unterleuten starts attracting the interest of newcomers and companies, old balances are threatened. The project of a wind farm by the Berlin company Vento Direct ignites new and old fights over land ownership: The company needs land, but the space they have in mind belongs to three different owners, each motivated by their own interests. Tensions lie dormant in Unterleuten, which otherwise serves young people as an escape from the frenetic life of the city. And yet, their fantasies of an idyllic existence in the countryside crash when new and old residents tramp on each other’s plans. Jule, one of the newcomers, who has moved to Unterleuten with her husband and daughter to enjoy slow-paced life, comments: “Ein Mensch konnte niemals genug Land besitzen – so viel hatte sie ihre neue Existenz im provinziellen Paralleluniversum bereits gelehrt” (A person could never own enough land—her new existence in the provincial parallel universe had already taught her that) (22–23). The acquisition and property of land become the cause of conflicts, until an unexpected purchase agreement throws possible alliances to the wind, and leads to a fatal fight, an almost deadly car accident, and a suicide. Only death and the voluntary departures of newcomers can ultimately “appease” old rivalries. The tragic twists in the plot show the challenges of changing a community that still operates based on the possession and appropriation of land, which the website foregrounds in the way it maps out the village and its characters.

Both Fürstenfelde and Unterleuten are presented as self-contained spaces, whose equilibrium is “threatened” by new arrivals and possible departures. In line with traditional *Dorfgeschichten*, which articulated the tensions between endogenous traditions and new forms of socialization and power, these contemporary versions of the genre show how the villages are both enriched and unsettled by newcomers. In *Before the Feast*, the elder painter, Frau Kranz, arrived as a refugee from the province of the Banat. During WWII, she was protected by the ferryman, who hid her in his house. Since then, Frau Kranz has made the village her new “Heimat,” which she holds together in the countless paintings she depicts. Among them, there is also one painting about a neo-Nazi, titled *Neo-nazi Asleep*, which represents Rico, known to the village people as the one neo-Nazi, while his girlfriend only counts as half neo-Nazi (89). While the novel does not elaborate on these descriptions and the presence of neo-Nazis in the village, with this insertion, it hints at the tension between immigrants and natives, and the alarming re-emergence of fascist ideologies in contemporary Germany. Other strangers, who do not belong to Fürstenfelde, are marked by the lack of a name, as is the case for the “Adidas man” (201), whose only identifying feature is the sport clothing he wears. In the night before the celebration, intruders in the village awake even more suspicion. A break-in into the Homeland House of Fürstenfelde brings the tension between openness and closure, belonging and not-belonging to its climax. Shocked by this event, the choral voice of the village announces: “If a window gets broken somewhere here, and stands open, we’re more afraid of what might get out through it than what might get in” (183). This intrusion is described as a violation of the village, especially because it allows the stories that were treasured in the museum for centuries to escape their secure location and become part of the larger narrative, revealing both its lost traditions and its dark past.

And yet, while *Before the Feast* acknowledges the presence of war refugees in Germany as well as the political shift toward ultraconservative positions, in *Unterleuten*, the relation between openness and closure continues as a battle for land ownership which focuses on the time of the divided Germany and the present. At the beginning of the novel, Kron sits in the village assembly and observes his fellow villagers:

Kron kannte jedes einzelne Gesicht, aber vor allem kannte er das Gesamtwesen. Hätte man die Beziehungsfäden sichtbar machen können, welche zwischen den Anwesenden hin und her liefen, wäre für den Uneingeweihten ein undurchschaubares Knäuel zum Vorschein gekommen. (104)

[Kron knew each single face, but most of all he knew the whole entity. If one could have made visible the threads of the relationships which ran back and forth among the attendees, the uninitiated would have seen an inscrutable knot].

The “inscrutable knot” of relations is partially untied for the reader as the different figures in the novel “open up” and reveal their stories. For example, the cause for the long rivalry between Kron and Gombrowski can be reconstructed by piecing together the accounts of the characters. As crucial details emerge, they open the way to events that change the dynamics in the village, creating new conflicts and alliances. Until the end of the novel, the reader does not know that the stories told are the result of a long investigation by journalist Lucy Finkbeiner, who has come to Unterleuten to research Gombrowski’s death and other accidents, having collected twenty file organizers full of stories and testimonies. The two novels represent in different ways the movement from the closed structure of the village to the arrivals of new figures. The projection of both villages onto the internet pushes this dynamic even further as the novels and their villages are presented to a broader audience of readers as well as random visitors who access the websites.

Finally, the line between facts and fiction runs thin in *Before the Feast* and *Unterleuten*. In the acknowledgments at the end of his novel, Stanišić mentions the real locations which inspired his semi-fictional Fürstenfelde. In Fürstenwerder, in particular, he conducted most of the research and interviews for his novel. As he comments in one of the entries on fürstenfelde.de, the reality of Fürstenwerder gets fictionalized: “In Fürstenwerder waren viele Ideen entstanden, dort sind sich die Fiktion und die Wirklichkeit am nächsten. Figuren wie Frau Kranz oder Frau Reiff, Materialien wie die Eierbox, Orte wie der Flugabwehrraketen-Stützpunkt oder das Haus der Heimat existieren in der Gegend auf ihre ganz eigene Weise” (Many ideas were born in Fürstenwerder, where fiction and reality are at their closest. Figures like Frau Kranz or Frau Reiff, materials like the egg box, places like the base of the anti-aircraft missile or the Homeland House exist in that area in their very own way). People, places and objects that Stanišić encountered in reality inspired their representations in the novel, but are complicated by the process of translation from reality into fiction, and by the play with different genres and forms.<sup>13</sup> Juli Zeh also plays with fiction and reality in *Unterleuten*.<sup>14</sup> While the village does not exist on any maps of Brandenburg, it carries elements that could be found in several villages of the rural region. The relation between fiction and reality is sustained well into the closing chapter in the novel. Here, the narrative frame is finally explained, revealing that the account is the work of the journalist Finkbeiner, who remarks:

“Den Namen des Dorfs musste ich ändern, ebenso die Namen von lebenden Personen, soweit diese darauf bestanden. Nicht allen war das wichtig” (I had to change the name of the village, as well as the name of the people who are still alive, if they insisted that I do that. Not all of them found this important) (629). *Unterleuten* is a fiction within the fiction of the journalistic account, which is further complicated once a village that does not exist on any real map becomes “navigable” as part of [unterleuten.de](http://unterleuten.de).

## fürstenfelde.de and unterleuten.de: Between Textual and Visual Representations

The comparison between *Before the Feast* and *Unterleuten* proves particularly fascinating not only due to the similar settings and their narrative and thematic overlaps, but also because both novels were made available to their audiences as printed books and their respective websites that accompanied them.<sup>15</sup> While the websites possibly respond to marketing decisions, it is nonetheless remarkable that, of all literary works published in the German-speaking world, two village novels led to digital and visual representations of their village stories, which readers and viewers can explore. This unusual parallel and the resulting relation between village narrative and the World Wide Web encourage some questions: How do the textual and digital elements complement each other? What is the meaning of these multimedia spaces in the context of contemporary German literature? And finally, do these projects allow the traditional *Dorfgeschichte* (village tale) and, by extension, the German village to survive? The two websites [fürstenfelde.de](http://fürstenfelde.de) and [unterleuten.de](http://unterleuten.de) help us reflect on the role of the multiple manifestations of the new German village and the media chosen to represent them.

Saša Stanišić has been curating the German website [fürstenfelde.de](http://fürstenfelde.de) since his novel was first published in early 2014. Named after the village protagonist of the novel, the website consists of multiple pages about the author and his work, while one section of the website is titled “Haus der Heimat,” the German name of the Homeland House in *Before the Feast*. “Haus der Heimat” consists of materials composed and edited between 2014 and 2018, which shows that the project of *Before the Feast* continued beyond the last page of the novel. This part of the website includes twenty round images in black and white, which capture important places, figures, and objects that relate to the narrative (fig. 1).

Echoing the name of the heritage museum, this website functions as a digital archive curated by the author, which include photos, images, texts, and articles related to the novel. For example, the reader familiar with the novel will recognize visual references to the lakes, as well as some of the objects



Fig. 1 | The section “Haus der Heimat” on the website fürstenfelde.de. © Saša Stanišić / fürstenfelde.de

that are mentioned in the narrative of *Before the Feast*, such as the eggs of Ditzsche’s chickens; the church tower and the bells of Fürstenfelde; and the vixen, which roams around the village in the night before the feast. A click on each of these images takes to different visual and textual insertions. These range from “older texts,” that is, shorter to longer excerpts from the original 699-page manuscript which did not make it into the published novel, to information about the novel and its reception. On the website, Stanišić’s novel kept “growing,” allowing the eager reader to learn more about Fürstenfelde, the project and Stanišić’s work.<sup>16</sup> In a conversation with Holger Heimann, Stanišić commented on his idea of creating a website for *Vor dem Fest* (*Before the Feast*):

Ich möchte gern eine Webseite erstellen fuerstenfelde.de – besuchbar von den Lesern. Und diese alten Texte sollen dort die Hauptrolle spielen. Das heißt, man kann die Schauplätze anklicken, die einzelnen Häuser, den Fluss. Und dann kommen aber nicht die Textstellen aus dem Buch, sondern die alten Texte, das heißt, das ist wie so ein Zusatzmaterial.

[I would like to create a website Fuerstenfelde.de—which readers can visit. And these old texts should play a main role there. That is, one can click on the locations, on the single houses, on the river. And then one can access not only excerpts from the book, but also the older texts, it is almost supplementary material.]

The website continues the plurality of the we-voice and the materials that make up *Before the Feast*, and plays with the history of the village tale, with its focus on the present and past stories. In this space, sections of the literary past of *Before the Feast* are treasured, showing how the novel developed and how some characters, such as the ferryman, Anna and the bell ringer, were re-conceived before entering the final manuscript. By looking at these excerpts, readers get to know the characters even more, while the use of photos, probably taken in the Uckermark, sustains the allusion of realism presented in the novel. “Haus der Heimat” is not simply a replica of the literary village, but it allows the reader of the novel or the clicker who randomly lands on this page to explore the village narrative of *Before the Feast* in the digital environment. The image of a boat in the grass, for example, reveals a list of definitions of what *Vor dem Fest* is, such as “*Vor dem Fest* ist ein Dorf auf einer imaginierten Landkarte, das Sie nicht betreten können, aber es irgendwie doch tun” (*Before the Feast* is a village on an imaginary map, which you cannot enter, but nonetheless you still manage to enter somehow). While readers know that Fürstenfelde is a literary space that cannot be found in physical and digital atlases, by scrolling from one story to the next, they are indeed navigating different sides of this semi-fictional village. The line between fiction and reality, which already runs throughout the novel, continues on the website. What makes this exploration even more interesting is that it introduces both to the literary spaces of the novel and Stanišić’s process of storytelling that led to *Before the Feast*. The digital fürstenfelde.de brings the reader behind the scene of the creative process and reduces the gap between the author and its audience.

The internet increases Fürstenfelde’s visibility and enriches its story with new details that live in the digital version of the Homeland House. The physical archive plays an important role in the novel because it protects the stories and chronicles of Fürstenfelde and its inhabitants. But in *Before the Feast*, no one has access to the *Archivarium* in this museum except for Frau Schwermuth, the archivist. One of the key events in the night before the annual festival is the moment in which somebody intrudes into the Homeland House, allowing stories and legends to escape from the physical archive. The we-voice inquisitively wonders: “Aren’t archives there to be consulted?” (160). With the digital space of fürstenfelde.de, Stanišić suggests that archives are indeed open to the curious visitor. The breach into the past presented in *Before the Feast* is replicated and encouraged on the website of Fürstenfelde, in which the reader

can “break into” each of the twenty “circular windows” and read old sections from the novel, as well as more recent news about Stanišić’s work. The digital version of the physical archive that Stanišić has created is significant because it not only replicates elements of the archive contained in the novel, but also makes them accessible to a broad audience. By creating a digital archive that complements the literary House of Homeland, Stanišić expands his project and allows its stories to be told. By opening its collection to present details and pieces of current news about the novel, and by merging the past of the narrative with the present of its author, who has been sporadically editing the website until now, these twenty stories create a new layer of meaning to the village tale presented in the novel.

The village is transformed from literary space into a virtual one that, similarly to the Homeland House, represents the point of encounter between present and past. This digital space, which functions as a growing archive, collects the stories told in and about Fürstenfelde. But this project also gestures to Stanišić’s approach to the writing of his village novel. Indeed, the author worked with the archives in the Uckermark to compose his work, which contains rethought versions of the stories and legends he discovered in old books and manuscripts. The internet page of Fürstenfelde thus initiates a new move, that is, from book back to the archive, this time a digital one. The visitor of fürstenfelde.de mimics that “intrusion” into the physical archive that the novel describes, but this time no one will panic. As he states in a radio interview with Nikola Steiner, Stanišić’s project represents a literary attempt “against disappearance,” and the website allows for the increased visibility of the village and its stories. fürstenfelde.de continues the project of *Before the Feast* in the present of its readers. The act of storytelling does not end with the last sentence uttered by the we-voice, but here it takes up new forms of narration that once again make the reader aware of the tensions that the novel describes. By functioning as a parallel companion to the novel itself, the website reinforces the role of the village tale and its author, who uses the technology at his disposal to also introduce the readers to the writing and circulation of the novel and its stories.

When *Unterleuten* appeared in 2016, a website dedicated to the novel also went live. Differently from fürstenfelde.de, this website carries the logo of the *btb* publishing house and includes links to other websites where the book can be purchased, marking it as an editorial enterprise rather than a personal project of its author. Its sophisticated look, which uses a red and green palette and animated movements among different sections, also distinguishes this project, which speaks to the popular novel as a marketable product. Indeed, the opening page of unterleuten.de includes a welcoming medium close-up of Juli Zeh: The writer stands in front of an otherwise empty road and a half-timber house rises on her right. The end of the street becomes blurry

and what might be a car in the distance is reduced to a colored spot. A detail from a stylized map is magnified in the foreground, zooming in on different parcels of land, labelled with the names of their owners. This opening page invites the German-speaking visitors to embark on a ten-minute tour of the village, reminding them that ultimately, they are always and everywhere, “unter Leuten,” that is, among people. This catchy—and rather flat—remark, which seems to appeal to occasional visitors of the website that may not know the novel, hints at how *Unterleuten*, albeit unique in the way it is crafted, becomes representative of a broader idea of community and of a general collectivity that extends beyond the rural boundary of Brandenburg. The visitor of the website can decide to spend just a few minutes exploring the community of *Unterleuten* and, if enticed to do so, can later proceed to purchase the novel.

The website provides a good introduction to an audience that is unfamiliar with Zeh’s work or a helpful orientation tool to the reader puzzled by the complex network of characters and events of the six-hundred-page novel. By clicking on the menu located on the top right corner of the page, one can explore different sections: “Willkommen” (Welcome), “Das Dorf” (the village), “Die Bewohner” (the residents), “Der Roman” (the novel), and “Die Autorin” (the author). Under the label “Das Dorf,” a full map of the land properties in *Unterleuten* is visualized (fig. 2).

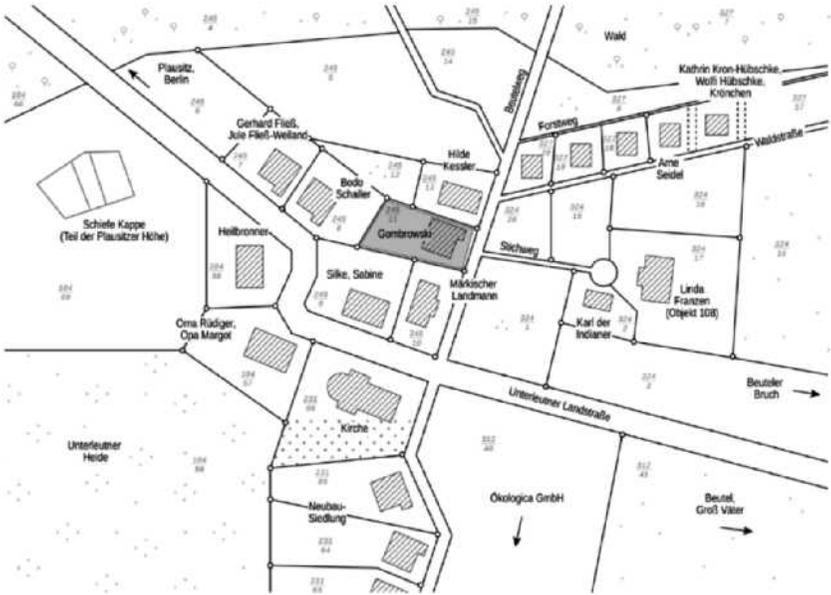


Fig. 2 | The map of *Unterleuten* on the website *unterleuten.de*. © Verlagsgruppe Random House GmbH

Because the novel revolves around the possession and acquisition of land, which affects current and past relations, the website aptly focuses the viewer's attention on how the different land sectors are connected to the figures and characters in the novel. A click on a specific land parcel leads to a place or, more frequently, a character, for which details of its story, origin and key characteristics are provided, together with excerpts from the novel (fig. 3). These detailed characters' profiles, which are collected in the page of the website labelled "Die Bewohner" (The residents), help navigate this complex community, in which, as Kron remarks, the knot of relations can be inscrutable to the unexperienced viewer. While this map does not reveal all the hidden dynamics of Unterleuten, it offers an elaborate image of this community and unveils at least the superficial layers of relations that bring the characters together.

In Zeh's work, Unterleuten is repeatedly described as a parallel universe, as a reality that exists outside of established social life. In the words of the character Gerhard Fließ, a former professor of sociology and now employee of the society for the protection of birds in Unterleuten, the village represents "eine halb-anarchische, fast komplett auf sich gestellte Lebensform, eine Art vorstaatlicher Tauschgesellschaft, unfreiwillig subversiv, fernab vom Zugriff des Staates, vergessen, missachtet und deshalb auf seltsame Weise frei. Ein gesellschaftstheoretisches, nein, gesellschaftspraktisches Paralleluniversum" (a half anarchist, an almost completely standalone life-form, a sort of pre-state society based on barter trade, unintentionally subversive, removed from the state's reach, disregarded and therefore strangely free. A social-theoretical, no, a social-practical parallel universe) (29). In Fließ's disparaging remark, Unterleuten is characterized as a standalone reality, functioning according to its own rules, which cannot be comprehended by the academic jargon projected onto it. But his interpretation of Unterleuten as a parallel universe is pushed even further later in the novel when the village becomes the material for a videogame that Frederik Wachs, one of the protagonists and newcomers, develops with his brother Timo. In the digital world referenced in the novel, this browser game called *Traktoria*, which was launched in 2004, counts more than 13 million players worldwide and continues to evolve to integrate the developments of the village (39). For example, Frederik decides to create a spinoff of *Traktoria* called "*Traktoria nature*," in which elements of the village enter into this fictional videogame. Frederik plans to develop a natural reservation for ruffs for his videogame players, which mirrors the one that the bird association of Unterleuten is trying to protect (535). Fictional reality spills into the digital world of the novel, suggesting that *Traktoria* represents a first, clickable version of Unterleuten. In this light, the website that accompanies the novel represents a more complex version of this project that readers can

## Rudolf Gombrowski

**Name:** Rudolf Gombrowski

**geboren:** 1954 in Unterleuten

**Beruf:** Landwirt, Geschäftsführer der **Ökologica GmbH**, früher Vorsitzender der LPG  
»Gute Hoffnung«

**Beziehungen:** verheiratet mit **Elena Gombrowski**, geb. Niehaus.

**Beste Freundin:** **Hilde Kessler**, **Jeder** im Dorf schuldet ihm was.

**Besondere Merkmale:** Sieht aus wie sein eigener Hund

**Hervorstechende Eigenschaften:** Laut und manchmal grob, aber schlauer als man denkt.

Der größte Vorteil entsteht, wenn jeder bekommt, was er sich wünscht – dieser Satz war für Gombrowski keine Masche, sondern eine Philosophie. Wenn alle zufrieden seien, sagte Gombrowski, hätten am Ende auch alle den größten Nutzen. Das sei das Schöne in Unterleuten. Man schaffe es immer, sich gütlich zu einigen. Gombrowskis Leben war ein Kampf für die Ökologica, ein Kampf für die ganze Region, während sich alle anderen die Zeit damit vertrieben, ihm Knüppel zwischen die Beine zu werfen. Wenn er das Wort »Politik« nur hörte, wurde ihm schlecht. »Politik« waren Leute, die eine Firma wie die seine kaputt sparten, um anschließend 20 Arbeitslose durchzufüttern. »Politik« war, wenn sich gelangweilte Westdeutsche mehr für Vögel als für Menschen interessierten.

nach oben

Fig. 3 | An example of the profiles and descriptions included on the website for each character of the novel. © Verlagsgruppe Random House GmbH

see—rather than imagine—and access. Unterleuten exists as the literary space of Zeh's fiction; it develops in the digital world in which the characters function; and it occupies a new digital space that readers can explore, creating a sophisticated network of references between fiction and reality.

The story of Unterleuten continues in the present of the internet. Indeed, the page of the website labelled "Der Roman" (the novel) reveals further details about the characters, for example, that some of them have Facebook profile pages (e.g., the journalist Lucy Finkbeiner and Jule Fließ) or are registered on a professional website (Sebastian Pilz of the company Vento Direct), and that, in the year the novel came out, they were actively engaged in online discussions. By providing the links to the social media accounts and to other digital spaces in which characters interact, the website allows its visitors to discover

the parallel existences that the population of Unterleuten leads beyond the boundaries of the printed texts. By complicating the representational modes of the village, unterleuten.de invites the reader to question the limits and possibilities of literary works in the digital age.<sup>17</sup>

On the website of Unterleuten, Juli Zeh provides an explanation for the multimedia form of her novel. Commenting on the “virtual cosmos” of *Unterleuten*, she states:

Die Erzählung ‘Unterleuten’ geht weiter, in Büchern, in Zeitungen, im Internet. Wenn Sie ihr folgen, werden Sie überall auf Teile von ‘Unterleuten’ stoßen. Weil die Gesellschaft nicht mehr so funktioniert wie zu Zeiten von Balzac, Thomas Mann oder John Updike, ist ‘Unterleuten’ als Gesellschaftsroman des 21. Jahrhunderts ein literarisch-virtuelles Gesamtkunstwerk.

[The tale “Unterleuten” continues in books, newspapers, on the internet. If you follow it, you will run into parts of “Unterleuten” everywhere. Because society does not function anymore like it used to at the time of Balzac, Thomas Mann or John Updike, “Unterleuten,” as a social novel of the twenty-first century, is a literary-virtual total work of art.]

By calling her novel a “literary-virtual total work of art,” Zeh redefines her work vis-à-vis the traditional form of the German village tale and the European social novel. As she positions her work at the intersection between village narrative and virtual project, Zeh transcends the narrative limits of the village and its story to present a complex “work of art,” whose boundaries are pushed to embrace different media. The contemporary village tale, Zeh shows, cannot be contained within the pages of the printed novel. The narrative about the new, global village engages in conversations that inevitably continue beyond the traditional spaces of literature. As they represent the complexity of contemporary village tales, Zeh and Stanišić refashion literary traditions in the context of larger discourses that happen outside of the villages they depict. With their works, both Stanišić and Zeh visualize the challenges that “new” German villages face, as they navigate the connections between past and present and the tension between residents and newcomers. In their experimentation with new representational modes, fictional village narratives give new visibility to the genre and the communities they depict. At the same time, the authors engage with their roles of writers in the digital age. On the one hand, they document the changes of contemporary villages similar to what the earliest writers of village tales wanted to do. On the other, their works continue in digital space that records the process of production and reception of the

works, by including images, interviews, videos, and reviews that take place beyond the limited space of their village tales.

## Conclusion

*Before the Feast* and *Unterleuten* showcase complex, contemporary microcosms in the province, which their literary and digital representations open to broader conversations about the significance of villages and the stories we tell about them. While the literary texts represent the first encounter between the villages and the readers, their digital representations position them within global dynamics that expand the possibilities of the village tale of the twenty-first century. In so doing, the websites reinforce the role of the village representations as “Laboratorien, in und mit denen gesellschaftliche Aushandlungsprozesse unter erkenntnistheoretischen und lebenspraktischen Perspektiven vollzogen werden” (laboratories, in which and with which societal negotiation processes between epistemological and practical perspectives are performed) (Nell and Weiland 20). Some of the dynamics that the novels already articulate at the level of the diegesis are intrinsically part of the internet space, which materializes the tensions between center and periphery, openness and closure, past and present, facts and fiction.

The dynamic space of the internet allows new possibilities of narrating and experiencing literature beyond the printed page. As digital spaces develop to expand and continue the printed novel, different audiences find new ways to experience literary works. By granting new visibility to the novels and their villages, these websites suggest that the contemporary village tale participates in globalized changes, which affect the ways in which village tales are narrated, visualized, and consumed. Villages may be slowly shrinking due to the fast-paced forces that are traditionally opposite to the slow-paced life of the village, but, thanks to fast-paced technologies, the village tale is told in new exciting ways. The digital enhancements of *Fürstenfelde* and *Unterleuten* speak to the affordances of literature in the digital age. The two websites may not completely change the way we read the novels, but they encourage us to reconsider the physical and imaginary limits of the villages they describe. When villages “go digital,” they are transported outside of their traditional spaces and ask us to rethink their roles and possibilities. As Hallstatt in China becomes a symbol of global tourism and a concretization of the portable village that can be visited thousands of miles away from its original location, *Fürstenfelde* and *Unterleuten* invite visitors to explore their spaces and meet their inhabitants, as well as the authors that created them, both on the printed page on the novels and in their digital representations.

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## NOTES

1. Wu writes: “A \$940 million Chinese clone of one of Austria’s most picturesque villages, the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Hallstatt, recently opened its doors to visitors in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong amidst some controversy.”
2. All the translations from the German provided in brackets are mine.
3. For a discussion of *Tatort* in the context of serialized representations of villages across media, see Stockinger’s “Dorf in Serie? Von der *Gartenlaube* zum *Tatort*.” The tradition of regional crime fiction is not a phenomenon limited to Germany, but also popular in the British and Scandinavian context.
4. In her article “Dorffroman oder *urban legend*: Zur Funktion der Stadt-Dorf-Differenz in Juli Zehs *Unterleuten*,” Moser also begins from a similar consideration (127).
5. Neuhaus describes these two “historical developments” as the cause of the “radicalisation of the town/country dichotomy in more recent literature” (15).
6. In his comprehensive study of the *Dorfgeschichte* of the *Vormärz*, Baur retraces the forms, goals, and changes of the genre during this revolutionary time of Germany history.
7. In *Erzählte Provinz: Regionalismus und Moderne im Roman*, Mecklenburg investigates the connection between realism and regionalism. In particular, see the section “Erzählte Provinz und Realismus” (71–75).
8. Donovan expands on this point in her 2018 article “The Jewish Literary Tradition in Heidegger’s *Heimat*,” which illustrates how Heidegger’s anti-Semitism led him to exclude works by regional Jewish writers in his essays.
9. In 2016, Stanišić published his third novel *Fallensteller*, which, in many ways, continues the narrative of *Before the Feast* and the author’s experimentation with the village tale.
10. Juli Zeh is the prolific author of several novels, essays and articles. Her award-winning debut novel *Adler und Engel* (*Eagles and Angels*) was published in 2001. Her latest work, *Neujahr*, came out in 2018. Zeh also holds a doctorate degree in international law and is actively engaged in politics.
11. The reason for this celebration is surrounded by mystery. As the we-voice states: “No one really knows what we’re celebrating. It’s not the anniversary

- of anything, nothing ends or began on exactly that day. St Anne has her own saint's day sometime in the summer, and the saints aren't saintly to us any more. Perhaps we're simply celebrating the existence of the village. Fürstenfelde. And the stories that we tell about it" (23–24).
12. Huber also highlights the significance of Frau Kranz's painting for the continuation of the narration and of the storytelling in Fürstenfelde after the death of the ferryman (166).
  13. The relation between facts and fiction is also discussed by Huber (160).
  14. Moser provides an insightful analysis of what she calls "Fiktionalitäts- und Faktualitätssignale" (fictional and factual signals) and reflects on how they affect the narration in *Unterleuten* (132–136).
  15. To the best of my knowledge, only one other village novel is accompanied by a website. It is Jan Brandt's monumental debut novel *Gegen die Welt* (2011), whose website (<http://www.gegendiewelt.de/jericho/>) includes a map of Jericho in Ostfriesland, as well as register of characters, places, and other references. The novel, however, shows a different regional focus than *Before the Feast* and *Unterleuten* and a tendency toward science fiction. Weiland also mentions this website in his contribution (113 n54).
  16. Some extra materials were also included in an enhanced e-book version of the novel published in 2015, which offers the reader the possibility to access pictures and additional materials within the digital book. This edition reinforces the idea that the story of Fürstenfelde kept "expanding" across media, first on the internet and then in the new, digital edition of the novel.
  17. *Unterleuten* asks us to reassess the meaning of fiction and reality in the realm of contemporary literature, as well as the significance of authorship in an age which partakes of the possibilities of virtual reality (see Weiland 113 n55). Manfred Gortz's self-help book *Dein Erfolg* (Your Success), which was actually published as paperback, e-book, and audio-book, is the favorite reading of ones of the characters in *Unterleuten*. Manfred Gortz can be followed on his website, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. And yet, this figure that seems so "real," is an alter-ego for Juli Zeh herself. The digital medium challenges the traditional world of literature and the role of the author in the digital age.

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