

## **‘Irgendwie wird es gehen’: Trauma, Survival, and Creativity in Saša Stanišić’s *Vor dem Fest***

### **Abstract**

This article argues that *Vor dem Fest*, Saša Stanišić’s second novel, represents a continuation of the author’s attempt, begun in his 2006 debut, *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*, to write about ‘sad things, positively’. Set in Germany, however, it also engages critically with the particular ethical and cultural-political challenges that writing about traumatic pasts has posed in this context. Through his protagonists, many of whom are engaged in different forms of creative practice, Stanišić shows how cultural memory is produced in response to trauma but threatens to overwrite violence with fabricated narratives. Nevertheless, creativity, practiced in response to, and as a means of, survival, retains the potential – for both the author and his characters – to bear witness to the past while producing something that ensures the continuity of the community. Drawing on theories of melancholy and the archive, and of trauma and survival, this article shows how Stanišić develops a mode of narrative that is both critical and productive in its response to legacies of violence and loss.

Bosnian-born author Saša Stanišić came to Germany in 1992 when his family fled the war in Yugoslavia. Several years later he wrote about the traumas of war and exile in his debut novel *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* (2006). As Brigid Haines notes, Stanišić’s literary response to trauma is striking because it ‘does not shirk the horror of the war’, but nevertheless ‘builds into its aesthetic the knowledge that time, like life, moves on’.<sup>1</sup> Or, as the author himself put it, he writes about these ‘sad things, positively’.<sup>2</sup> Haines shows how a ‘belief in the power of invention’ is key to Stanišić’s aesthetic, a belief that persists in his second novel. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Brigid Haines, ‘Saša Stanišić, *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*: Reinscribing Bosnia, or: Sad Things, Positively’, in *Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century*, eds, Stuart Taberner and Lyn Marvin, Rochester NY 2011, pp. 105-18 (p. 105).

<sup>2</sup> Stanišić quoted in Haines, p. 105.

article, I argue that *Vor dem Fest* (2014) can be read as a continuation of the author's attempt to write about 'sad things, positively'. In this text, however, Stanišić activates the creative force of narrative as a response to trauma and survival in a different context, namely contemporary Germany. More specifically, *Vor dem Fest* is set in provincial East Germany, a choice of socio-political locale that generated considerable media discussion. While commentators debated the status of the 'Dorfroman' in contemporary literature and the claim of the 'migrant' writer to this 'German' genre, scholars have read the novel and the discussions it provoked in terms of transnational memory, transcultural politics, and the author's rejection of 'unhelpful binaries' often mobilised in the construction of identities.<sup>3</sup> However, as the jury for the Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse (awarded to Stanišić for *Vor dem Fest* in 2014) recognised, the author's decision to write about a village in Brandenburg also indicates an interest in, and, moreover, a willingness to critique, German memory culture and memory politics: "Vor dem Fest" unternimmt eine Probebohrung in die Tiefe deutscher Geschichte als Mythologie; ein Unternehmen allerdings, das den gegenwärtigen Kult weihevollen Gedenkens subtil verspottet'.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I show how *Vor dem Fest* casts a critical light on the dynamics of collective memory, dynamics that have made the work of remembering and commemorating the past so fraught in the German context,<sup>5</sup> while developing a narrative response to trauma and survival that looks beyond what at times might seem like the static and introverted discourse of *Erinnerungskultur* to mobilise creativity in the face of loss. Undoubtedly

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<sup>3</sup> The media debate was provoked by Maxim Biller's article 'Letzte Ausfahrt Uckermark', *Die Zeit*, February 20, 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/2014/09/deutsche-gegenwartsliteratur-maxim-biller>. It generated a number of responses, for example, Iloma Mangold, 'Fremdling, erlöse uns!', *Die Zeit*, February 27, 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/2014/10/erwiderung-maxim-biller-deutsche-gegenwartsliteratur> and Rainer Moritz, 'Jeder Ort ist Heimat', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 13, 2014, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/buecher/jeder-ort-ist-heimat-1.18261461>. In her analysis of Stanišić's text, Frauke Matthes engages critically with the terms of this debate ("Weltliteratur aus der Uckermark": Regionalism and Transnationalism in Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest*), in *German in the World: A Culture in National, Transnational and Global Contexts*, eds James Hodkinson and Benedict Schofield (Rochester, NY, forthcoming 2019). I am grateful to the author for sharing the manuscript with me.

<sup>4</sup> Extract from the jury's statement, <http://www.preis-der-leipziger-buchmesse.de/de/Preistraeger/Archiv/2014/>.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen in der Erinnerungskultur*, Munich, 2013.

Stanišić's particular perspective on Germany, which is both intimately familiar with internal discourses of memory and framed by personal experiences of external trauma, allows him to write about the 'sad things' inherent to German identity and history in ways that are at once subtly critical and productive.

*Vor dem Fest* tells the story of a broad array of characters who make up the community of Fürstenfelde. This village in Brandenburg is, in part, based on the real place Fürstenwerder, in part, the author's fictionalization. The narrative takes place on the night before the annual Anna Feast,<sup>6</sup> a time when both sleepless residents and the ghosts of the past roam the streets of the village. The significance of this festival has gradually become unclear – 'Was wir feiern, weiß niemand so recht' – but it seems to have begun as a means of commemorating the death of a woman named Anna, who was burnt at the stake centuries ago.<sup>7</sup> In interview, Stanišić explains that before he had the idea of the village community, he wanted to write a story structured around six women from six different generations all called Anna and who are all 'immer in einer individuellen Weise mit dem Tod konfrontiert, mit dem Thema des Abschieds, des Wegreisens oder von irgendwo Weggehens'.<sup>8</sup> On the night before the Anna Feast, the five Annas from the past would return to the present and accompany Anna Geher, the young woman who jogs through Fürstenfelde before she leaves the village to begin her university studies the next day, and tell her stories. Although Stanišić did not quite realise his original idea, *Vor dem Fest* is still populated by a number of Annas: as well as Anna Geher, there is Ana Kranz, the local painter, who was forced to leave her home in the Banat region in 1945, and Johanna Schwermuth, the local archivist, whose work confronts her with the evidence and narratives of

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<sup>6</sup> This is how Anthea Bell translates 'Annenfest' (Saša Stanišić, *Before the Feast*, trans. Anthea Bell, London, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Saša Stanišić, *Vor dem Fest*, Munich 2014, pp. 30; 28. All further references will be given in parentheses in the text using the abbreviation VF.

<sup>8</sup> Radio interview with Nicola Steiner, '52 beste Bücher', *Radio SRF 2 Kultur*, September 14, 2014, <http://m.srf.ch/sendungen/52-beste-buecher/vor-dem-fest-von-sasa-stanisic>.

Fürstenfelde's turbulent past. Overwhelmed by 'von außen kommende Kräfte',<sup>9</sup> these different Annas can be understood as figures of trauma and its recurrence throughout history, and the Anna Feast a means of reinstating order following loss or violence. Thus, over time, it has become a celebration of continuity, of the survival of the village in spite of the traumas it has experienced: 'Vielleicht feiern wir einfach, dass es das gibt: Fürstenfelde' (VF 30). However, in the night before the feast, the threat of past violence returns and haunts the village once again.

The community of Fürstenfelde oscillates between painful awareness of its own precarity and pride in its endurance. The village has suffered plague, war, and famine, and is threatened now, like many places in former East Germany, by a declining population. But it has always survived and the villagers are confident that it will continue to do so: 'Wir glauben: Es wird gehen. Es ist immer irgendwie gegangen. [...] Irgendwie wird es gehen' (VF 12-13). This dual awareness of death and survival comes from the cultural memory of the village: myths and legends bear witness to the traumas of the past and survive in the stories told by the (now deceased) ferryman and in the documents preserved in the local archive. Like the endurance of the community, the endurance of this legacy is at once remarkable and beyond doubt: 'Wer schreibt die alten Geschichten? Wer errichtet dem Schrecken ein Denkmal? [...] Und ein Feuer kommt, und alles ist weg, alles. Wer schreibt das Feuer auf? [...] Einer. Einer schreibt. Einer hat es immer geschafft' (VF 222-27). However, the unshakable conviction of the village in the endurance of memory is questioned in the narrative. Stanišić asks *how* this cultural memory has persisted where so much has been lost. In exploring what has remained of Fürstenfelde's past, *Vor dem Fest* considers what has been fabricated, perhaps as a means of covering over the losses sustained by the village, and thus what has been silenced and repressed as a consequence. As Frauke Matthes observes, the recently deceased ferryman was

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

both the ‘creator and [...] guardian’ of village memory,<sup>10</sup> an observation that can be extended to a number of the novel’s characters. Engaging in various forms of creative practice – storytelling, painting, pottery, carpentry – they contribute both to the inscription of the village’s past and the production of something new. Through these characters, Stanišić shows how the production of cultural memory is a necessary but necessarily ambivalent response to trauma: in the creation of the more palatable narratives that circulate as village history, violence and loss are encrypted, that is, preserved only by virtue of being hidden. Nevertheless their creative acts have more positive potential: Stanišić shows how they allow survivors to generate something for the community that bears witness to destruction and disappearance while ensuring the renewal – and thus continuity – of the village.

In an essay that revisits Freud’s theory of trauma as expounded in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, Cathy Caruth considers trauma as an experience of survival and asks ‘*What is the nature of a life that continues beyond trauma?*’<sup>11</sup> She focuses on Freud’s description of the *fort-da* game, the strategy developed by his own grandson to overcome the departure (and ultimately, death) of the little boy’s mother. Caruth argues that the game not only allows for the mother’s symbolic return (‘da’), it also ‘substitute[s], for the pain of loss, the very pleasure of creation itself’.<sup>12</sup> In so doing, it also asks ‘*What kind of witness is a creative act?*’<sup>13</sup> The repetition of the game – ‘beginning again’ – ensures that the repetition of departure is experienced not as death but as (the child’s) survival, that is, a ‘departure into life’.<sup>14</sup> Caruth notes that this is seen in Freud’s language, which transforms the ‘fort’ of the mother’s departure into the ‘fortführen’ of the child’s game and the child’s life: this ‘language of departure [...] does not repeat the unconscious origin of life as death, but *creates a history* by precisely

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<sup>10</sup> Matthes, ‘Regionalism and Transnationalism in Saša Stanišić’s *Vor dem Fest*’.

<sup>11</sup> Cathy Caruth, ‘Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival’, *Intervalia* 2 (2014), 20-33 (p. 23), emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22, emphasis in original.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22; 24.

departing toward survival'.<sup>15</sup> This is the kind of witness that a creative act might constitute. As I will show, Caruth's reformulation of trauma as the experience of survival that provokes creativity as a substitute for loss and which thus opens the possibility of witness 'to what remains un-grasped within the encounter with death' can be traced in *Vor dem Fest*.<sup>16</sup> Here, acts of creativity have the potential to bear witness to the traumas of history; through the language of survival, Stanišić tells of 'sad things, positively'.

In their creative approach to the past, Stanišić's protagonists reflect the author's own narrative practice, which plays with the ambivalence between fact and fiction. Writing *Vor dem Fest*, Stanišić visited a number of East German villages and researched in local museums and archives, but embellished what he found in reality with fabricated elements. Through the proximity of his own practice to that of his protagonists, Stanišić implicates himself in the ethical questions related to memory posed by and in his narrative. *Vor dem Fest* is distinctive for its first-person plural narrator, which represents the village community of Fürstenfelde past and present. Stanišić insists that, through his time spent in the communities that served as the model for his text, he is just as much part of this 'wir'.<sup>17</sup> As Daniela Strigl noted in her laudation for *Vor dem Fest*, Stanišić can even be said to 'adopt' the village of Fürstenfelde.<sup>18</sup> In this way, his approach resonates with that of his contemporary Katja Petrowskaja, who, in her literary debut *Vielleicht Esther* (also published in 2014), advocates adoption as a means of taking responsibility for, rather than (mis)appropriating, the memories of others.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, both texts can be understood in terms of Michael Rothberg's 'implicated subject', a concept that addresses 'the indirect responsibility' of those 'situated at temporal or geographic distance

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Steiner, '52 beste Bücher'.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Britta Bürger, 'Sich ein Dorf ausdenken', *Deutschlandradio Kultur*, March 14, 2014, [https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/leipziger-buchmesse-sich-ein-dorf-ausdenken.954.de.html?dram:article\\_id=280069](https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/leipziger-buchmesse-sich-ein-dorf-ausdenken.954.de.html?dram:article_id=280069).

<sup>19</sup> Katja Petrowskaja, *Vielleicht Esther*, Berlin 2014. See also Dora Osborne, 'Encountering the Archive in Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther*', *Seminar* 52/3 (2016), 255-72.

from the production of social suffering.’<sup>20</sup> Through his implication in the narrative ‘wir’ and his ‘adoption’ of the village community this encompasses, Stanišić engages critically with the production of collective memory, showing how the identity of Fürstenfelde is constructed not only from what is preserved of the past, but also from what this construction represses, elides, or forgets.<sup>21</sup> However, he also considers and re-enacts through narrative the creative processes that ensure the survival of the community beyond its own traumatic history. It is this use of a potentially ambivalent creativity in narrative that Stanišić once again writes about ‘sad things, positively’.

## I

*Vor dem Fest* shows how the structures of cultural memory (rituals, memorials, museums, archives) have shaped the history of Fürstenfelde, which is to say, how the community understands itself through the village’s past. As well as the annual Anna Feast, Fürstenfelde boasts a war memorial, a commemorative stone, a local history museum, and an archive (both housed in the ‘Haus der Heimat’). The village also has Frau Kranz, the local painter, or ‘Heimatmalerin’, who has documented life in Fürstenfelde since she arrived there as a refugee at the end of the Second World War. Her ‘Chronik in Öl, Aquarell und Kohle’ seems to ensure that generations of residents will be remembered: ‘Sie alle hätte man irgendwann vergessen, aber so ein Bild kann man nicht vergessen’. The power of her images to counter oblivion is limited, however. The narrators concede this point, but emphasise that this is not the point: ‘Natürlich werden viele trotz der Bilder bald vergessen sein, es geht um das Prinzip’ (VF 85).

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Rothberg, ‘Trauma Theory, Implicated Subjects, and the Question of Israel/Palestine’, *Profession 2* May 2014, <https://profession.mla.org/trauma-theory-implicated-subjects-and-the-question-of-israel-palestine/>. See Maria Roca Lizarazu’s discussion of *Vielleicht Esther* and implication following Rothberg, ‘The Family Tree, the Web, and the Palimpsest: Figures of Postmemory in Katja Petrowskaja’s *Vielleicht Esther* (2014)’, *Modern Languages Review* 113/1 (2018), 168–89.

<sup>21</sup> Matthes also emphasises Stanišić’s interest in the construction of memory, arguing that this allows him to show how notions such as ‘Germany’ and ‘Europe’ are very much ‘made’ (‘Regionalism and Transnationalism in Saša Stanišić’s *Vor dem Fest*’).

This principle is pivotal to the collective memory of Fürstenfelde, and is held and upheld by the village through its rituals and institutions. Yet these are shown to produce a version of the past whose edges have been smoothed and which is easily consumed, as every year at the Anna Feast and in the kitschy pictures painted *ad infinitum* and *ad absurdum* by Frau Kranz.

Stanišić shows how this version of village history is produced through the exclusion, silencing, and repression of traumatic episodes. However, in the night *before* the feast that serves to re-establish the status quo, these elements assert themselves once again, and Stanišić focuses on what he calls this ‘uncanny’ time in order to show the tension between the cultural memory that structures and preserves village life and the threat of violence that has only seemingly been banished from the community and which threatens to return.<sup>22</sup> This is a night of distractions and deviations from the narratives that have been fashioned and repeated in the construction of the village’s history. In these uneasy hours we learn about those aspects of Fürstenfelde’s past that have been elided from the official version: ‘Anzahl der auf der aktuellen Wanderkarte als “sehenswerter Einzelbaum” gekennzeichneten Bäume: zwei’ (VF 163). This information is incorrect, however: there is a third tree, found on the field owned by Anna Geher’s family, which over the centuries has been the site of many executions, including those carried out by Russian soldiers at the end of the Second World War. There is no sign of this dark history, however, and the village laments the indifference shown by others: ‘man [möchte] manchmal vor Wut am liebsten das ganze Feld mit Zement zuschütten, aber nicht, weil man auf das Feld und die Eiche wütend ist, sondern weil das außer Frau Schwermuth niemanden interessiert. Nicht mal eine Tafel weist irgendwo darauf hin’ (VF 163). Significantly, the ‘wir’ expresses frustration through the use of ‘man’ and those who fail to remember are referred to only as ‘no-one’; it is thus unclear who exactly from the community advocates memory and who would rather forget. The narrators quickly admit that such an

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Nicola Steiner, ‘52 beste Bücher’.

outburst is deviation from the status quo, an outburst attributed to the exceptional status of the night before the feast: ‘Wir schweiften ab. / So eine Nacht ist das’ (VF 163).

In the night before the feast, Frau Kranz sets out to paint yet another picture of the village. The narrators note how her paintings ‘bilden die Welt selbstgenügsam ab. Erzählen nicht mehr als das Sichtbare,’ and suspect that someone who has lived through four different regimes has seen more than her innocuous images show (VF 86). Earlier in the day she gave an interview to a local journalist who writes a feature about the work of this local painter for the next day’s newspaper. Frau Kranz is perturbed but polite in the face of the journalist, who bombards her with a series of clichés attached to the region: ‘eine H-Bombe nach der anderen: Herkunft, Heimat, Hobbys, Hitler, Hoffnung, Hartz IV, in keiner spezifischen Reihenfolge’ (VF 54). He wants to find some greater significance in her images, specifically he wants to see them as an expression of her traumatic loss of *Heimat* when she fled the Banat region in 1945. Frau Kranz resists the journalist’s projections, not because she is unaffected by the past, but because his naïveté in believing he can reduce her life to buzz words alerts her to the gap between her actual experiences and his superficial grasp of them. In interview, Stanišić likens himself to both the journalist and to the artist: he asked the residents of the Brandenburg villages he researched similarly probing questions, even after he was asked these things by journalists following the publication of his first book. On the one hand the scene reflects his own frustration at the tendency to read his work in terms of his personal traumatic experiences, but on the other it expresses his realisation that such questions are, in fact, relevant, even while they remain the most difficult to answer: “lauter Dinge, die man sehr schwer erzählen kann [...] das sind tatsächlich relevante Fragen.”<sup>23</sup>

Like the villagers, we sense that, despite being hugely productive, Frau Kranz has witnessed things that she is unable to give expression to through her painting. As she tells the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

journalist, 'Beim Malen helfen Erinnerungen nicht immer' (VF 92). Since Frau Kranz is affected by night-blindness, her nocturnal excursion is unlikely to confront her with 'das Sichtbare,' and it seems that she has ventured into the night, the night before the Anna Feast, to make one more attempt to paint what has eluded her until now: 'Sie möchte einmal nicht die Wirklichkeit gemalt haben, sondern etwas, das später wirklich geworden ist.' (VF 94). Ana Kranz's reference to something that only later becomes real suggests a traumatic experience (following the psychoanalytic concept of *Nachträglichkeit*), as does her inability to find adequate expression for this belated encounter with the real: 'Aber wie geht das?' Specifically, she wants to paint 'das Böse [...] in uns,' but likewise fails to find a way of doing so: 'aber wie geht das?' (VF 94) It seems that the place on the lake to which Frau Kranz returns on the night before the feast is a site of traumatic witness. When she arrived in Fürstenfelde having fled from her home in the Banat, she hid from the encroaching Russian troops under a boat. She was found by the ferryman who let her hide under the floorboards of the boathouse. From here it seems she witnessed six women being raped by Red Army soldiers. When the ferryman gave her a piece of charcoal, she drew these six women on the walls of the boathouse, then six years later transferred the image to canvas in her first painting. Ana Kranz is not only plagued by what she saw all those years ago, but by her failure to do anything other than watch: 'Was hätte sie hindern...hätte ich sie hindern können?' (VF 101). Her painting functions as a belated attempt to respond, seeking to make good retrospectively what she failed to prevent: in transferring the women to canvas, she also clothes them and combs their hair (VF 100). However, shown standing in the water holding hands, these women now bear no signs of the trauma they experienced, and the image is open to misreading: 'Sie könnten tanzen. [...] Sie könnten ein Spiel spielen. [...] Sie könnten Freundinnen sein' (VF 85-86). On the night before the Feast, Ana Kranz returns to the site of witness and attempts to paint what she saw, that is, the violence she witnessed rather than the overwriting of this in a restorative, reparative gesture.

However, Frau Kranz's night-blindness prevents her and she produces only a grey canvas, evidence that this trauma resists representation. She returns home 'durchgefroren und durcherinnert und schlechtgelaunt' (VF 287). The six women who haunt Frau Kranz might also be understood in relation to the six Annas of six generations who were to structure Stanišić's narrative originally. In this sense, they figure (and configure) both historical and transgenerational trauma. Their persistent presence in the narrative through references to Frau Kranz's first painting indicates the author's concern with the inscription of traumatic memory and the ambivalent role that creative gestures play. While they ensure the inclusion of 'sad things' where traumatic memories resist representation, the 'positive' or reparative mode employed has the potential to obscure the original violence.

## II

Frau Kranz's paintings represent an important and familiar medium through which the village sees its past and thus its collective identity, but the principal institution of cultural memory in Fürstenfelde is the local history museum, dubbed 'Haus der Heimat'. This name gestures to the archival function that the museum also has: the documents gathered there are 'potentielle[] Recherchematerialien' that wait to be used by any visitor not deterred by the strictly enforced opening times and scant facilities – telephone, coffee vending machine and visitors' toilet – available to them (VF 123). As Derrida notes at the beginning of *Archive Fever*, the word archive comes from the Greek *arkheion*, 'a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of [...] the *archons*, those who commanded.' These figures are 'first of all the documents' guardians', but they also have 'the power to interpret the archives'.<sup>24</sup> In the 'Haus der Heimat', the woman who runs the archive, Frau Schwermuth, determines how the documents relating to

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<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago, IL, 1996, p. 2.

Fürstenfelde are read, and thus the construction of *Heimat*. The archive determines, for example, how the material that remains to the village is ordered:

In den Leitz-Ordnern finden sich:

*Personen und Persönlichkeiten*

*Geschichte I (1740-1939) und Geschichte II (1945-1989)*

*Gegenwart I (1990-fortlaufend)*

*Handwerk, Kunst und Kunsthandwerk im Wandel der Zeiten*

*Feste, Bräuche, Vereine*

*Glaube, Kirche (Glocken), Krieg*

*Sagen und Legenden (I, II, III) (VF 123).*

The archive controls not only how documents are ordered, but also what is included in, and thus excluded from, the official record of the village's past. Notably, 'history' is divided into two phases, pre- and postwar; the years 1939-45 are entirely unaccounted for.

Frau Schwermuth exerts most control over the cultural memory of the village as kept in the 'Haus der Heimat' through the so-called 'Archivarium'. This underground part of the museum is said to house a 'sensationellen historischen Fund', but, since access is restricted by a heavy door and a new electric combination lock, the villagers are still none the wiser as to what this might be: 'Fakt ist: Zum Archivarium existiert kein Katalog, und eine öffentliche Nutzung findet bis heute nicht statt' (VF 126). Occasionally, Frau Schwermuth exhibits certain documents in the glass cases upstairs, and in 2011, when Fürstenfelde celebrated its 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary, expectant crowds came to an open day at the 'Haus der Heimat' to see what was behind the door. They were disappointed, however: 'Frau Schwermuth erklärte, sie hätte mangels geeigneter Präsentationsmöglichkeiten und in Erwartung großen Andrangs die doch wertvollen Stücke in Sicherheit bringen müssen' (VF 143). The villagers accept the archivist's explanation, although not everyone is entirely happy with it: 'Einblick in das Archiv bekommt

bis heute niemand. Sind Archive nicht wegen Einblicke da?’ If this material has been deemed worth keeping, should it not be accessible to the very community to which it relates? The villagers concede that they can access the archive, but this is possible only via the archivist: ‘Gut, es stimmt nicht, dass wir keinen Einblick in das Archiv haben. Frau Schwermuth ist der Einblick’ (VF 144). On the night before the feast, however, a break-in, or perhaps more accurately, a break-out (the glass from the broken window is found *outside* the building) at the ‘Haus der Heimat,’ specifically the ‘Archivarium’, threatens the control the archivist otherwise exerts over the collective memory of the village. At this uncanny time, the ghosts of the past free themselves from the confines of the archive and escape into Fürstenfelde; the fugitive pieces of history then appear in the small anecdotes interspersed in the narrative.

The archivist is clearly committed to the guardianship of Fürstenfelde’s past and proud of the ‘Haus der Heimat,’ but the villagers are forced to question her methods. For instance, the small sample of documents she displays in the museum predate the catastrophic fire that decimated the village in 1740. According to Frau Schwermuth, this material survived by a miracle and thanks to the ‘tipptopp’ facilities of the ‘Archivarium’, but it seems more probable to the villagers that these are forgeries (VF 127-28). On the night before the feast, the archivist’s son, Johann sees a light on in the ‘Haus der Heimat’ and goes to investigate. His mother has also been alerted to the break-in, however, and she inadvertently locks her son in the ‘Archivarium’. As he waits to be released, Johann has time to look around him and finds the underground space very different to the open day in 2011: ‘Johann kennt den Raum von der 700-Jahr-Feier, da war er fast leer. Jetzt ist er vollgestopft mit Büchern in Regalen und auf anderen Büchern, mit Papierstapeln überall. [...] In der Mitte ein Tisch, darauf Schreibzeug, eine Lupe und noch mehr Papier’ (VF 156). He sees the tools of his mother’s work, which clearly goes beyond guardianship and verges on authorship. Johann finds an example of this among the books on the shelf. It is the story of a tinker who finds a magic ring that makes him

invisible. The tale has been edited and revised by hand, an intervention that Stanišić reproduces in the text (VF 187-90). Johann summarises his mother's revision as follows: 'Der Ring des Kesselflickers. Jochim wird unsichtbar, die Leute kriegen Angst, er entscheidet sich, trotz krasser Pluspunkte, gegen die Unsichtbarkeit, *The End*. Hm. Mu erzählt das anders. Jochim bleibt unsichtbar und ärgert die Leute, die ihn früher immer verarscht haben' (VF 210).

Frau Schwermuth's work at and with the archive is fundamentally contradictory: she takes an unrivalled interest in Fürstenfelde's history and dedicates her time to preserving the traces of the past; but faced with a history of death and destruction makes a fiction from these facts that threatens to undermine the status of the 'Haus der Heimat' and her own reputation. The archivist's ambivalent practice might be understood in terms of the melancholy, which, as her name suggests, afflicts her. Through her intimate knowledge of the village's past, she is burdened by the history of catastrophe that has befallen Fürstenfelde over the centuries. For the depressive Johanna Schwermuth, this burden takes on physical dimensions in the form of excess weight. As her son Johann explains, Frau Schwermuth 'wiegt 130 Kilo. Im Frühling kommen 30 Kilo schwere Gedanken dazu (Sorgen, Ängste, Scham und generelle Lustlosigkeit)' (VF 130). Her obesity is in fact a side effect of the medication she takes, which controls the debilitating effects of her local historical knowledge by debilitating her physically: 'die Medikamente [machten] sie müde und fett. Die aber hielten die Geschichten unter dem Deckel. Die Geschichten und jene, die sie bevölkern' (VF 240). Anna Geher, who, on the night before the feast, is plagued by memories (VF 185), tries to empathise with Frau Schwermuth, but the archivist sees her connection to the village's past as unique: 'das sei lieb, aber niemand könne sich das vorstellen, was sie sich vorstellen könne, niemand' (VF 240). As Mary Cosgrove explains, melancholy is a pathological attachment to a lost object, but where 'the

subject fails to identify and name the lost object that caused his/her sadness'.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the lost object cannot be named, because melancholy is in fact a response to the failure of language to articulate loss and trauma per se, what Kristeva calls, 'the real that does not lend itself to signification'.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, Frau Schwermuth's pathological attachment to Fürstenfelde's past seems to be a means of distracting herself from her own situation and the sadness it inexplicably causes her. Her son believes, 'Mu lenkt sich mit der Vergangenheit von der Gegenwart ab. Also von ihrem Körper und ihren Sorgen' (VF 131). On the other, it seems to be caused precisely by the archive, by the confrontation with the evidence of recurring catastrophes that threaten the existence of the community even as it documents its survival. It is not for nothing that the village chronicle produced by Frau Schwermuth's predecessor, Paul Wiese, is dubbed a 'Melancholikerschrift' (VF 144).

As Jonathan Boulter has argued, the melancholy subject has a particular relation to the archive because she or he preserves 'the memory of loss and trauma' as and in a 'kind of crypt'.<sup>27</sup> He notes how literary protagonists who 'move within and through the material archive' can themselves become archives, 'specifically inasmuch as [they become] melancholic in a Freudian sense of the term'.<sup>28</sup> Boulter develops his understanding of the relationship between melancholy and the archive through Derrida, whose conception of melancholy in *The Ear of the Other* is 'uncannily fleshy': 'it is an image of history as a kind of viral, material presence, working its way into the body of the melancholy subject, who becomes, in its turn, a kind of cryptological archive'.<sup>29</sup> As such, the melancholy subject is 'ventrilocated through history': 'history [...] speaks through the subject from within the

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Cosgrove, *Born under Auschwitz. Melancholy Traditions in Postwar German Literature*, Rochester, NY, 2014, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Cosgrove, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Boulter, *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel*, London, 2011, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

subject, fashioning the subject as *subject to history*'.<sup>30</sup> Following Boulter's reading of Derrida, Frau Schwermuth, the 'uncannily fleshy' archivist through whom village history is mediated ('Frau Schwermuth ist der Einblick'), can be seen as 'subject to' and 'ventriloquated through' history: history speaks through her. However, the history that speaks through her is a history of loss; it is this loss that both the archive and the melancholy subject preserve in and as 'a kind of crypt', and the thematisation of the archive and melancholy in *Vor dem Fest* 'reif[ies] the very object within which memory – and history – itself is continually erased'.<sup>31</sup> In the case of Frau Schwermuth, her re-writing of archival documents performs precisely this drive for preservation that can only fulfil itself as erasure. Faced with the losses sustained by the village, she seeks to produce something where nothing remains, but in so doing overwrites history. In many ways, Frau Schwermuth's practice re-enacts the author's own – Stanišić takes the documents he finds in local archives and changes them – and he claims an affinity with his melancholy archivist.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, his novel (read both inter- and extra-diegetically) evidences what Boulter identifies as 'a fascination with the idea of the real archive combined with an acute anxiety about how the self can respond ethically, really, to the demands of history'.<sup>33</sup>

Frau Schwermuth is an ambivalent figure, whose response to the 'demands of history' is contradictory. If, as Cosgrove has argued, melancholy became a privileged and ethically responsible mode of remembering after Auschwitz because it drew on a noble cultural tradition,<sup>34</sup> Stanišić seems to parody this (mis)appropriation in his melancholy archivist, who regards the past with a superior reverence. Her willingness to rewrite history through her forgeries and manipulations, however, suggests a different attitude towards the past she claims

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7, emphasis in the original

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Nicola Steiner, '52 beste Bücher'.

<sup>33</sup> Boulter, *Melancholy and the Archive*, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Cosgrove, *Born under Auschwitz*, 3-8.

to preserve. Frau Schwermuth follows the mantra of Fürstenfelde's most notable celebrity, a TV astrologist, whose predictions the archivist has playing on loop in the 'Haus der Heimat':

*Das ganze Leben, sagt Britta Hansen und lächelt Frau Schwermuth an, ist ein ewiges Wiederanfangen.*

"Ist doch wahr", flüstert Frau Schwermuth. Sie schaltet den Fernseher aus und steigt in den Keller hinab. Sie hat noch ein paar Fragen an den Kesselflicker. (VF 163).

The archive offers a source of infinite beginnings to Johanna Schwermuth, but her creative impulse finds expression in the secret space of the 'Archivarium' and produces the forgeries she tries to pass off as authentic. Her melancholy means that her creativity is threatened by an equally destructive impulse. This can be seen in the story of the tinker, which Frau Schwermuth revises to make a fantasy of erasure, for her son, possibly a fantasy of self-erasure: 'Vielleicht wäre sie am liebsten unsichtbar' (VF 130).

### III

While Stanišić gently critiques Frau Schwermuth's melancholy appropriation of and monopoly over Fürstenfelde's past, exposing her archival practice as driven by equally powerful desires for creation and destruction, he presents the general principle of production more positively and, moreover, as a more democratically available mode of responding to the traumas that have affected the village. Indeed, the archivist is descended from Fürstenfelde's smiths, representatives and practitioners of a mode of manual production pivotal to village life, and the tinker whose story appeals so strongly to Frau Schwermuth, is a master of repair.<sup>35</sup> Production is shown in *Vor dem Fest* as a means of responding to traumatic histories that is critical to the survival of the community, and something in which the Fürstenfelder are particularly adept:

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<sup>35</sup> As the title indicates, his reparative impulse is also at the heart of Stanišić's first book, *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*.

‘Sollte die Menschheit am Rande des Untergangs stehen und zum Überleben auf Selbstgemachtes angewiesen sein, die Fürstenfelder würden alle überdauern, da würdest du staunen, aber du würdest nicht lange staunen, weil wir dich überdauern würden’ (VF 238). As the vixen who roams the Brandenburg countryside observes, this seems to be a very human impulse and capacity: ‘Darin machen die Menschen das, was die Menschen am liebsten machen: aus einer Sache eine andere’ (VF 191). While such creativity has the potential to overwrite or erase what has gone before, as Stanišić shows us through the practice of the melancholy archivist and the compulsive gestures of the painter Ana Kranz, the practice employed in the village and by the community more generally, has the potential, rather, to bear witness to the traumas of history in the manner suggested by Caruth and outlined above.

Fürstenfelde’s potter, Frau Reiff, lives and works in the old smithy and specialises in the ceramic technique of raku. Fired at extremely high temperatures, its craquelure glaze produces a series of lines and cracks unique to each piece. As well as housing her work, the studio also provides refuge to the village ghosts. These revenant figures appear to Frau Reiff together in a vision that brings together the sufferings of different times in one place and she attempts to care for them as her ‘children’. With her pottery she produces small memorials to these fractured lives: ‘Raku-Keramik zeichnet sich aus durch feine Risse, die beim Abkühlen der Glasur zufällig entstehen. Sie verlaufen niemals gleich. Wie Brüche und Einschnitte in unserer Biografie, die als Brüche und Einschnitte Teil der Biografie werden’ (VF 239). In this way, she produces something new while inscribing the stories that make up the village’s past: or as Caruth has it, she ‘*creates a history*’ by ‘beginning again’.<sup>36</sup> In a similar vein, Fürstenfelde’s carpenter, Eddie, has spent his life saving and repurposing what others have broken and discarded. Like the ferryman, he has also recently died, and it falls to the two young men, Lada and Suzi, to clear out his house. While his sister orders them unsentimentally to get

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<sup>36</sup> Caruth, ‘Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival’, pp. 25; 22.

rid of everything ('Weg damit!'), they are reluctant to do so: 'Der Tischler hatte doch alles für uns aufgehoben. Materialien, die er irgendwann zu Dingen machen wollte, um sie uns zu verkaufen, oder Dinge, die uns zugehört waren, die aber bislang keiner wollte, und schließlich Dinge, die wir kaputt gemacht haben und die bei ihm gelandet sind' (VF 264). The village understands how the junk in the carpenter's house holds the potential to make something useful from the remnants of the past, but now after his death, in a symbolic sense, also to bear witness to that past, including those elements that would ordinarily be excised from an ostensibly functional or presentable narrative of Fürstfeld: 'Wir tragen Eddies Werkstatt in uns. [...] Auch das gebrochene ist in uns, das Nutzlose, das Ausgediente' (VF 265). The mass of material in Eddie's workshop tells not only the carpenter's story, but that of the whole village: 'diese[] Unendlichkeit an Rohstoff, Gerät, Werkzeug, Staub und Biografie, auch unserer Biografie' (VF 264).

For Stanišić, the response of his protagonists to the traumas of the past is a response to survival: 'es geht um das Weitermachen, [...] dass es immer weitergeht'.<sup>37</sup> Throughout history, the existence of the village has been threatened, and the community reacts in two possible ways: either by repressing traumatic episodes or by responding to them creatively, by finding what the author calls 'Auswege'.<sup>38</sup> This two-dimensional response to trauma underpins both the depiction of his fictional community in *Vor dem Fest* and Stanišić's own narrative process. On the one hand, he shows how traumas are repressed or silenced through their encryption in cultural memory. On the other, he shows how creative practice bears witness to the past while also turning to the future through the fact or circumstance of survival. The productive, reparative, or creative responses of his protagonists constitute 'Auswege,' which can be understood in terms of Caruth's reading of Freud as departures into survival. One such

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<sup>37</sup> Reading given in May 2014, made available through *Zeit Online* on 17 February 2017, <https://www.zeit.de/video/2017-02/5326729364001/lesung-sa-a-stani-i-liest-aus-seinem-roman-vor-dem-fest>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

‘Ausweg’ is found by a Rumanian farm worker, who comes to the village with others to find seasonal labour. When neo-Nazis from the area graffiti the container they live in with the words ‘*Rumänen raus*’, the worker responds by making a positive slogan out of a negative one. Using toilet paper and sticky tape, he transforms the ‘r’ of the neo-Nazis’ to an ‘H’, so the words read: ‘Rumänen-Haus’ (VF 290-91). It is not for nothing that Frau Kranz makes the Rumanian’s creative act the subject of one of her paintings, and that the village believes it is her favourite work. While she struggles to give expression to the trauma she witnessed upon her arrival in Fürstenfelde, she finds inspiration in his spontaneous gesture which transforms the attempt at exclusion into an attempt at inclusion. The day after the night before the feast, Frau Kranz unveils her latest painting, which is to be auctioned as part of the festivities. Rather than the grey canvas that resulted from the unproductive night spent at the edge of the lake, she reveals a vivid portrait of village life, featuring the different people, past and present, dead and alive, who make up the community of Fürstenfelde, including herself at her easel. The bidding begins and the starting price offered by Anna, the figure representing the village’s recurring traumas, whose ghost gestures from the bonfire. However, she is outbid by the ‘wir’, the village community and Stanišić’s collective narrator. Fürstenfelde has survived and lays claim to the image that testifies to this, an image which, like the narrative itself, insists on saying ‘sad things, positively’.