



“Doing” ontological security: on the role of traditional festivals and heritage in times of crisis

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Abstract. The literature on ontological security has considerably improved our understanding of how crises, disruptions, and their perceptions lead to subjective insecurities or anxieties. In particular, it has illuminated how individuals cope with the insecurities of late modernity by searching for stabilizing anchors, such as routines and biographical continuity. While existing research on ontological security has largely examined narrative strategies and identity constructions, this article shifts the focus onto active, embodied, and situated practice. Based on a qualitative case study of the Schäferlauf – a biannual traditional festival in Bad Urach, Germany – we show how heritage practices can function as stabilizing anchors in times of crisis. Through qualitative fieldwork including interviews and photograph elicitation, we analyse how the festival enables individuals to anchor their identities through embodied and place-based practices, such as wearing traditional costumes and participating in preparations. These practices generate a sense of continuity in personal biographies, and reinforce social ties and place identity. This study provides new directions for research on festivals as sites of social and cultural stability and continuity, while also laying the groundwork for further research into ontological security as an embodied and situated practice.

1 Introduction

A globalized world is for many a world devoid of certainty, of knowing what tomorrow holds. It is a world where many people feel intensified levels of insecurity as the life they once led is being contested and changed at the same time. Globalization challenges simple definitions of who we are and where we come from. (Kinnvall, 2004:742)

Drawing on Giddens’ notion of ontological security (Giddens, 1991, 2008), Catarina Kinnvall (2004:744) argues that globalization has led to a loss of people’s “protective cocoon of relational ties”, thereby making individuals and groups feel increasingly insecure. The literature on ontological security has contributed widely to improving our understanding of how crises, disruptions, and their perceptions lead to these insecurities or anxieties. More specifically, it has illuminated the ways in which “individuals can ‘cope’ with the chaos of late modernity” (Steele and Homolar, 2019:219) by searching for “stabilizing anchors” (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017:7),

such as routines and biographical continuity (Agius et al., 2020:435). More than 20 years after Kinnvall’s *Zeitdiagnose*, the question of insecurities that are connected to what are often called today multiple crises or a polycrisis (Ruwanpura et al., 2025; Seyd, 2025) remains highly relevant.

Kinnvall describes “going back to an imagined past” (Kinnvall, 2004:744) as a strategy for coping with insecurity and regaining a sense of stability. Through this strategy, individuals and communities come to embrace “symbolic and mythical narratives that rest on imaginaries of a secure and stable past” (Agius et al., 2020:436), such as national or religious narratives. This particular approach has been analysed mainly to understand far-right narratives and mobilization (Bartoszewicz, 2021; Kinnvall, 2018; Kinnvall and Svensson, 2022; Steele and Homolar, 2019; Agius et al., 2020). However, we argue that there are also other ways of producing stability through engaging with the past. Specifically, heritage offers material and spatial reference points, as well as practices through which the past can be experienced, embodied, and felt. Indeed, heritage scholars have shown that en-

gaging with the past by visiting heritage sites can function as such an anchor. Built heritage sites, for example, have been discussed as sources of ontological security, as they allow people to situate themselves within longer historical trajectories and experience continuity between the past and present (Sofaer et al., 2021:1124).

This paper contributes to existing research by shifting the focus from ontological security as a primarily narrative or symbolic construct to that of an active, embodied, and situated practice. We argue that ontological security is not only something that people imagine or narrate but also something that they do. Based on a case study of a traditional festival in a rural setting, we examine how heritage is performed in ways that are not necessarily right-wing populist, yet can nonetheless still produce community and a sense of security. In other words, we show how such practices can constitute a doing of ontological security that contributes to embedding and anchoring subjects in times of global insecurity, fostering relational ties that are often described as being lost.

Research on festivals has long highlighted their ambivalent character. On the one hand, festivals have been analysed as important sites of community formation and collective identity building (see, for instance, Turner, 1969; Bennett and Woodward, 2016; Duffy and Mair, 2018; Kockel et al., 2020). On the other hand, festivals have been critically discussed in the context of their instrumentalization, particularly regarding cases in which festivals become urban strategies and tools of place marketing, which stage public space as a spectacle (Smith et al., 2022); such practices are often framed as *festivalization* (Häußermann and Siebel, 1993; Cudny, 2016).

By building on critical heritage studies that understand heritage as a process and practice in the present (Smith, 2006), as a performance, and as "doing" (Smith, 2012; Haldrup and Børenholdt, 2015), we approach festivals not simply as representations of a (past) community but as sites where heritage is enacted through embodied and collective practices. Festivals are therefore not only occasions for re-enacting tradition or (past) community but moments in which these practices are actively produced. We argue that these recurrent and shared practices can be understood as a "doing" of ontological security, thereby generating stability through embodied engagements with place and tradition.

We further suggest that, in times of multiple crises, festivals assume an important role as stabilizing practices of ontological security that help to embed and anchor individuals in present places and communities. To this end, we scrutinize the Schäferlauf (Shepherd's Run), a local festival held in a small town called Bad Urach in southern Germany, which was added to the UNESCO National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2018.¹ Rooted in medieval traditions

and originally celebrating the annual gathering of the Shepherds' Guild (*Schäferzunft*), this festival continues to serve as a key cultural event in the region.

Our case study is based on qualitative interviews conducted using the methods of photograph elicitation and reflexive photography. In the following account, we first introduce our theoretical framework (and the notion of ontological security). We then present the methods of our case study, analyse the empirical results, and end with a discussion on the role of traditional festivals in times of crisis.

2 Ontological security – narrating continuity and stability between the self and a place

In times of multiple global crises – that is, "when multiple crises interact, amplifying and complicating the impacts of one another" (Ruwanpura et al., 2025:697) – questions of security and the handling of threats become central issues in many societies (Helbrecht, 2025:217–218). Geopolitical developments shape subjective perceptions of security and insecurity (Helbrecht, 2025), and their effects are felt among ordinary citizens (Kinnvall, 2004:742). This entanglement is central to current debates in feminist geographies and critical geopolitical security studies, which reveal how security is simultaneously both local and global, and personal and political (Botterill et al., 2019, 2020).

An influential framework for understanding the link between the global geopolitical scale and individual experience is Giddens' (1991, 2008) notion of ontological security. Building on the work of psychologist Laing (1965), Giddens adapted the concept for the social sciences to explain how individuals can still maintain a sense of security in the face of global developments involving threats or crises. This subjective perception of security is grounded in a form of confidence in the self and in the surrounding social and material environment:

Ontological security is the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action. A sense of the reliability of persons and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security; hence the two are psychologically closely related. (Giddens, 2008:106)

Ontological security refers to "a psychological need for a sense of predictability and continuity" (Waite et al., 2014:314). This form of confidence can be understood on multiple levels, ranging from embodied everyday experiences to the more symbolic level of "being-in-the-world" (Giddens, 2008:106; see Dihlmann and Helbrecht, 2025:3). Without this fundamental sense of security, individuals may experience anxiety and a sense of disorientation, which would ultimately undermine their capacity for agency (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017:4). Given that geopolitics are deeply

¹For further details, see the official website of the German UNESCO Commission: <https://www.unesco.de/staette/die-tradition> (last access: 12 June 2026).

interwoven with subjective feelings of security (Genz et al., 2023), examining how individuals construct and narrate their ontological security can offer valuable insights into broader societal structures and processes. Thus, the theory becomes a useful and productive lens for relating individual perceptions of (in)security to global crises and social transformations – all of which are embedded in specific societal, historical, and material contexts (Helbrecht, 2025). Ontological security thus “enables an understanding of social context alongside psychological registers that shape human security, connecting the geo-social with intimacy-geopolitics” (Botterill et al., 2020:1144).

The theory of ontological security has been widely applied across various fields of inquiry, including international relations (Mitzen, 2006; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017), housing studies (Pohl et al., 2020; Genz and Helbrecht, 2023; Power, 2023), and migration research (Waite et al., 2014; Botterill et al., 2019). Many such studies focus on ontological insecurities (Bondi, 2014; Waite et al., 2014; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017, 2020), such as those that arise in situations of crisis (Pustulka et al., 2024), (forced) migration (Vaughan-Williams and Pisani, 2020; Secen, 2024), or experiences of discrimination and marginalization (Croft, 2012; Dobruskin and Helbrecht, 2021; Botterill et al., 2019). Botterill et al. (2019:472), for instance, have looked at “strategies of resistance and resilience that young people use to preserve ontological security in the context of racism and Islamophobia”.

This paper shifts the focus onto the processes of securitization (Botterill et al., 2019). Our aim is to understand the workings of the strategies of securitization and the forms of stabilizing anchors (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017:7) that individuals use to produce and maintain ontological security. Following Bondi (2014), Kinnvall (2018), and Banham (2020), we conceptualize ontological security not as a binary condition (i.e. something one either has or does not have). Rather, we think of it as a continuum and an ongoing process. Banham (2020), building on Bondi (2014), has emphasized that “an individual can feel ontologically secure and insecure about different things simultaneously” (Banham, 2020:133), thereby rejecting the idea that (in)security represents a singular, essential state of being. Instead, ontological security can be understood as a dynamic process that is continuously negotiated – a “security of becoming” (Kinnvall and Svensson, 2022:529) – and a discourse and embodied (everyday) practice that generates feelings of stability and continuity. However, as Kinnvall indicates, “there is no core or autonomous self to return to in order to feel ontologically secure” (Kinnvall, 2018:531). Rather, we must understand feelings of security as forms of subjective imagination (Kinnvall and Svensson, 2022:529).

We engage with two core ideas from Giddens’ concept of ontological security: (1) the continuity of self-identity and (2) the stability provided by both social and material environments. Ontological security emerges from the relationship between the self and the environment (Kinnvall and Mitzen,

2017:5), along with an individual’s embeddedness in stable socio-material surroundings. In this vein, researchers in geography (Castillo Ulloa et al., 2021; Helbrecht et al., 2021; Helbrecht, 2025) and heritage studies (Grenville, 2007, 2015; Nolan, 2019; Sofaer et al., 2021) have discussed the role of space in maintaining ontological security:

Through spatial references, individuals reassure themselves of their understanding of the world and their place within it. If ontological security is thus based on specific (stable and continuous) relationships between the subject and its own identity as well as its environment, the concept of geographical imagination helps us to understand this image of the “environment” – the places, landscapes, and regions in which the subject lives, imagines itself, and becomes anchored or disanchored. (Helbrecht, 2025:223)

Building on Harvey’s (1973:23–27) notion of geographical imaginations, Helbrecht et al. (2021) have revealed how spatial knowledge and geographic references intertwine with ontological security. In concurrence with narratives of the self, continuous social relationships and stable narratives of place (i.e. geographical imaginations) play an important role in the construction of ontological security. They are interwoven, thus creating a framework within which individuals continuously construct their subjective identity.

Researchers in heritage studies have engaged with the concept of ontological security to understand the subjective meanings attached to heritage sites and the historical built environment (Grenville, 2007, 2015; Nolan, 2019; Sofaer et al., 2021). For instance, Sofaer et al. (2021) highlighted the fact that visiting heritage sites “enables individuals to situate themselves within the *longue durée*, reflect on mortality, and find meaning in the continuity between past and present” (Sofaer et al., 2021:1124). Therefore, it has been claimed that the “social value” of the historic environment is a proxy for ontological security (Grenville, 2015:49). Specifically, Grenville (2015) suggests that ontological security is not merely about preserving buildings but rather centred on fostering civic and emotional resilience through meaningful narratives of place. Focusing on conservation policy, she calls the archaeologists and social and architectural historians to work with local populations and uncover what is important to the specific local community (Grenville, 2015:58). As stated earlier, we refer to “heritage” in the sense of critical heritage studies – as today’s construction of the past, established through practices, processes, and negotiations (Smith, 2006).

Accordingly, we approach the notion of ontological security through narratives of continuity and stability that are told around the festival. We are particularly interested in how traditional festivals contribute to the production of continuity through local identity. Moreover, we examine how this affects the subjective feeling of security, specifically in terms

of how it is produced as an embodied and material practice that we theorize as "doing". We also analyse how these narratives are space related.

3 Methods, fieldwork, and case study

3.1 Study and fieldwork

This research is part of a broader qualitative study on the role of geographical imaginations in feelings of ontological security in four rural areas in Germany and Canada. The objective of our methodological approach was to access the emotional and affective levels of subjective productions of space across the four locations. This paper is based on empirical data from Bad Urach (Baden–Württemberg, Germany), collected in 2022 and 2023 through 24 qualitative interviews, two collective mapping sessions (with a total of eight participants), participant observation, and document and media analysis.

To access the subjective production of space, we applied three different qualitative interview methods: photograph elicitation, reflexive photography, and collective mapping (Harper, 2002; Dobrusskin et al., 2024; Bittner and Michel, 2018). While the photograph elicitation was based on images selected by the researchers, for the reflexive photography, participants themselves took or chose their own photographs. This allowed the participants to position themselves differently in relation to the images (Pohl and Helbrecht, 2022:543). During collective mapping sessions, participants actively contributed to creating a subjective map of Bad Urach. They were asked to identify places they perceived as secure or insecure, to map their everyday routes, and to reflect on which places were particularly relevant in the town.

In the first year, we deployed photograph elicitation. A selection of photographs was used that, with the exception of one image, was identical across all four research locations. The images represented topics such as home, nature, urban–rural relations, global crises, and the "state of the world". This was accompanied by questions that invited the participants to share the associations and feelings that the images evoked (see also Pohl and Helbrecht, 2022). One image represented the town of Bad Urach. In this case, we showed a photograph of the market square during the Schäferlauf, as our prior research had indicated that the festival is one of the main local events. In the second year of the research, we applied the method of reflexive photography. Participants were asked to take four photos on the topics of home, nature, global crises, and locality, and these were then discussed in the interviews.

Research participants were selected via snowball sampling and direct contacts. Of the 32 participants, 29 were current residents of the town, while others were former residents who remained connected to Bad Urach, for example, through family ties. As the Schäferlauf emerged as a recurring and cen-

tral topic during the first phase of interviews, we followed the principle of theoretical sampling (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) in the second year and deliberately included participants who were actively engaged in the festival. The sample included participants with diverse sociodemographic backgrounds in terms of age, gender, occupation, and length of residence who were actively involved in the Schäferlauf as performers or organizers, or who participated as visitors or supporters without an official role.

Qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2022) and elements of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) were then applied. With the support of the software MAXQDA, we analysed the data along predefined thematic categories and recurring keywords, as well as inductively, to identify themes and aspects that emerged beyond the predefined interview questions and thematic categories.

3.2 Case study on the Schäferlauf

This is one of the largest and, certainly, most colourful and spectacular traditional folk festivals here on the Swabian Alb. And the people of Urach are very, very proud of it. We're also proud that, in 2018, the Schäferlauf was added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. (BU0622_33)²

Officially celebrated in Bad Urach since 1723, the Schäferlauf was originally conceived as an annual gathering and general assembly of the Shepherds' Guild.³ The event was held in various locations across the region as a series of additional meetings complementing the main assembly in the region's main town of Markgröningen. The three Schäferlauf festivals in the region, which are still celebrated today, were included in Germany's national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2018 by the UNESCO Commission. The festival takes place every two years and draws thousands of visitors; the local media reported around 25 000 to 30 000 visitors in 2025 (Oechsner, 2025; Wagner, 2025). The celebrations span three days and reference the historical annual gatherings of shepherds in the region. The festival begins on a Friday with the shepherds' performance on herding, where modern-day shepherds demonstrate their skills. The second day features a traditional foot race, followed by a theatrical performance in the evening. The festival concludes on a Sunday with a grand parade, in which various regional groups participate. These core elements are accompanied by folk dances, such as the shepherd's round dance (*Schäferreigen*) on the second

²The interviews were conducted in German and translated by the authors. All interview participants have been anonymized. In a few cases, original terms are retained in square brackets and italicized. The abbreviations in parentheses refer to anonymized interview sources and were assigned by the authors.

³On the history of the Schäferlauf in the region, see Hofmann (2003) and Schad (2011).

day, and symbolic rituals, including the handover of insignia and the official opening ceremony.⁴

We use the term "traditional festival" to highlight the event's connection to heritage discourses. While the term is frequently used as a point of reference (mostly in contrast to contemporary festivals), there is no fixed terminology that defines exactly what distinguishes a contemporary festival from a traditional one. However, there are several recurring elements that can serve as a framework for understanding those festivals described as traditional. First, they reference historical communities (Giorgi and Sassatelli, 2011:4–5). Second, they aim to represent "relatively localized communities" (Bennett et al., 2016:1), with the festival serving as a means through which the community can affirm and commemorate its identity. Third, while referencing the past, their primary role is to celebrate the heritage of the community.

4 "Doing" continuity and stability through the Schäferlauf

Our case study, the Schäferlauf in Bad Urach, is not merely a celebration of cultural heritage but also an active process of community making. In all parts of the festival, the local population is actively involved in various roles. However, the festival's meaning for the community does not derive its significance primarily from the individual rituals performed during the Schäferlauf. We argue that the festival's "social value" (Grenville, 2015) emerges from the embodied practices of the Schäferlauf, both during the months of preparations before and through the period of coming together at the festival.

These practices, which we refer to as "strategies of securitization", enable individuals to anchor themselves in the stability of the Schäferlauf and thereby strive for (and achieve) ontological security. The festival provides both a symbolic and a material framework for a sense of stability and continuity for a being-in-the-world.

4.1 Continuity of the self through the Schäferlauf

4.1.1 Biographical continuity – the Schäferlauf as part of an intimate self-narration

During the first phase of data collection, interview participants were shown a photograph of the Urach town square taken during the Schäferlauf. The image was not introduced or explained; instead, the participants were invited to share their spontaneous associations. For one interviewee, the photograph immediately triggered memories of the anticipation and excitement they experienced as a child during the Schäferlauf. They went on to describe their childhood recollections and early participation in the festival:

Back then, we lived right in the middle of it all, near the Amandus Church. And it started early for me, even as a small child. At six in the morning, the bell would ring. "Ah, we need water for our *Gäule* – the horses, that is". Or, "We need some sewing supplies, there's a button missing somewhere on the uniform". So really, from the very beginning, I was right in the heart of the action. And then, of course, through the club, through the Sängerkranz Urach [local choir association], we had to peel potatoes at five in the morning. They were cooked in a steam pot, and then a few women would come, sit around the living room table, and diligently peel potatoes. (BU0322_35)

The interviewee described how, as a child, they were part of the Schäferlauf. Although they were not involved in the official programme or any performances, their participation was still referred to as "being right in the middle of it". This is not defined as formal participation but rather as taking over supporting tasks that are performed in the background of the festival. Being at the heart of the action is expressed here in two ways: (1) through physical proximity, with their home being close to the centre of the events, which enabled them to provide spontaneous, last-minute help, such as fetching water for the horses, and (2) through social integration within the local association structures. Together, these aspects created a strong sense of involvement, even without official roles, and contributed to the feeling of being an integral part of the festival community. This example highlights the various forms of participation and commitment, as well as the sense of togetherness among those who perform and those without a specific role but who still contribute behind the scenes. It shifts or expands the meaning of the festival towards the community itself, which – through its efforts at all levels in the background – makes the event possible in the first place.

Kinnvall and Mitzen (2017), drawing on Giddens, have argued that a sense of biographical continuity is a prerequisite for the creation of ontological security (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017:6), through which subjects affirm themselves in the world. In this context, the Schäferlauf offers such a form of continuity and becomes part of the intimate self-narration that provides the subject with a stable sense of identity. The above quote emphasizes the personal importance of and emotional attachment to the festival and also shows the manner in which self-narratives are constructed through the Schäferlauf. Viewing the photograph reactivated memories and embodied experiences, thereby highlighting the affective bond between the festival, the individual, and their personal biography. The quote also illuminates the embodied and place-based aspects of the Schäferlauf: sitting around a table and preparing a potato salad becomes a practice of social connection and, at the same time, demonstrates how continuity and stability are "done" through specific practices.

⁴For a detailed description of the Schäferlauf in Bad Urach and its structure, see (in German): <https://www.badurach-schaeferlauf.de/der-schaeferlauf> (last access: 19 February 2026).

4.1.2 "Doing" the Schäferlauf – a festival as a community of practice

For some participants involved in performances or the parade, this sense of community and reconnection developed long before the official event. Local residents collaborate over several months to prepare the festival. Across various locations in the town – clubhouses, community centres, and private homes – people come together to craft, rehearse, sing, dance, and sew. These social relationships formed around the Schäferlauf emerge through close interaction in the preparatory phases, as well as through active participation in the event itself – through the shared "doing" of the Schäferlauf. Here, not only are social bonds created but knowledge is also produced and passed on. These practices are more than acts of repetition of established rituals; they are processes of mutual learning. In this sense, they can be understood as communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2013 [1998], 2000). While the concept was originally developed to understand "learning as a social process" (Wenger, 2000:226), we follow Amin and Roberts in adopting a broader understanding of communities of practice as sites of "knowledge creation" (Amin and Roberts, 2008:356) or production. This also enables us to grasp the productive aspects of these practices.

This ongoing involvement creates a form of participation that embeds individuals into the festival well in advance of its public appearance, thereby fostering a strong sense of belonging and commitment. This personal commitment was especially emphasized in the context of conflict. In response to complaints regarding noise levels and local disruptions, one participant highlighted the fact that since they invested their free time months in advance to prepare for the festival, they had earned the right to enjoy a proper celebration:

We've been working towards this since March or April, rehearsing once or twice a week. For us, the Schäferlauf is really just one big celebration. And I think we've earned it – if you spend half a year practising regularly, putting a lot of your free time into it, then you deserve to be rewarded with a great party. So, when they say the pub has to close at 1 a.m., it's like, why am I even doing this? Just let Schäferlauf be Schäferlauf. (BU0523_59)

The above quote refers to the most prominent dance group of the festival, the *Schäferreigen*. First and foremost, this highlights the effort required for the preparation of the festival. At the same time, it emphasizes the narrative of the festival as a carnivalesque "state of liminality" (Turner, 1969), in which social rules are temporarily suspended or at least – according to the interviewee – should be. Here, the interviewee also frames the festival as a reward for the work and commitment of the active participants, offering them recognition, symbolic compensation, and a break from routine.

These preparatory practices are an integral part of local social life in the months before the festival period, helping to establish and strengthen social ties. The dance group is regularly invited to perform at other events, both within and outside town. These practices extend the festival's impact beyond the three days, generating social bonds that transcend the formal context of the dance group. These connections, formed in the context of the festival, also evolve into lasting friendships. As one interviewee shared, the group had already organized several trips together (BU0323_113). These are not merely performance communities but communities of friends who celebrate together, travel together, and maintain enduring relationships that reach far beyond the Schäferlauf itself. This particular person had been actively involved in the *Schäferreigen* for several years and shared that the year of the interview would likely be their last as a dancer. They admitted to fearing the moment they would have to step away from the group, anticipating that it would feel strange not to be part of it anymore. The idea of laying down the costume and attending the Schäferlauf merely as a visitor evoked a sense of unease and a fear of losing the feeling of belonging and connection to the event:

I think I still see myself being part of it later on as an *Altschäferin*. Because once you've been in the *Reigen*, it always stays with you – I think there's always a connection. And right now, I honestly can't imagine watching the next Schäferlauf from the outside, without wearing the traditional costume; not at all. (BU0323_117)

While the interviewee cannot yet imagine attending the Schäferlauf simply as a regular visitor or spectator, there is nonetheless a sense of confidence that will endure due to the connection to the festival. This sense of continuity is symbolically reflected in the term *Altschäferin*. Derived from the word *Altschäfer* (used in the female form in the quote above), the term refers to those who have stepped back from active participation in the *Schäferreigen*. Meaning "old shepherd", the word designates former members and acknowledges their lasting bond with the group and the festival community. Similar to what was described in the first section, those described as *Altschäfer* remain an integral part of the festival through their continued support in the background. Although no longer active performers, they contribute in various ways, helping to organize, prepare, and maintain the festival:

But I think you can really tell – for example, when it comes to the *Altschäfer*, as we call them, the ones who used to be in the *Reigen* but are now too old to take part – many of them are still actively involved and help us out. Like this Thursday, for instance, we have our main rehearsal, and the *Altschäfer* will be the ones serving the beer. (BU0323_113)

Thus, the narrative of the self is closely tied to the group and, through it, to the festival. Stepping down as a dancer brings the fear of exclusion – of becoming merely an external spectator. However, the role of the *Altschäfer* provides a continued sense of belonging within the group. Even those who are no longer dancers remain part of the festival through the established tradition of becoming an *Altschäfer*. The person's confidence in remaining part of the *Schäferreigen* is rooted in a role that, although not officially listed in the festival programme, they are part of the established rites of the group.

4.1.3 Continuity in embodied and material practices

These strategies of securitization extend into the embodied experience of the participants wearing the traditional folk costumes (*Tracht*) mentioned above. Each performer is stepping into and then laying down the costume – which becomes, ultimately, a material act of inhabiting and embodying the historic continuity of the Schäferlauf. Hence, costumes are not only symbolic representations of a place history and identity but also material vehicles that connect and relate the embodied subject with the history and traditions of its social and material environment. Through the practice of passing on traditional costumes from generation to generation, this act marks both an ending and a new beginning and, thus, a continuation, thereby signalling a transition of roles while sustaining the festival's living tradition:

The costumes are, of course, tied to the dancing, and the *Tracht* doesn't belong to me either. It gets passed on. I also got a really old *Tracht* back then. I don't know how old, but you can already tell it's old, and I think that's cool. Like, you know that a lot of women have already danced in this *Tracht*, and it's been through a lot, and I'll have to give it back. (BU0323_121)

The traditional costume represents (engendered) narratives of history, continuity, and identity. For the interviewee, stepping into an old *Tracht* symbolizes a connection to the past – one that she carries forward by wearing it. The act of passing on the costume is not just convenient; it is a ritual that materializes belonging and reinforces the continuity of the self within the collective. Thus, the *Tracht* becomes a material expression of tradition, identity, and one's enduring role within the Schäferlauf. The dancer positions herself within this ritual as one of many women who contribute to this continuity, while also personifying the *Tracht* itself, which – through signs of wear – visibly reflects this continuity.

On the one hand, the above quote emphasizes the bodily and material dimensions of these practices. On the other hand, it indicates the intricate entanglement of the discursive and the material. The subject is one element in the production of continuity, but the wearer's subjectivity is not the focus. Rather, continuity emerges through the intertwinement

and, therefore, the co-production of bodies, discourses, and materialities.

Overall, these narratives of biography, embodiment, and community building illustrate how the Schäferlauf offers a framework for the continuity of self-identity, extending to the act of wearing the *Tracht* as a form of bodily experience with which the individual identifies. This sense of continuity is reinforced by the social and material environments in which the festival is embedded, particularly through its deep connection with the town of Bad Urach.

4.2 Continuity of Bad Urach's place identity through the Schäferlauf

4.2.1 Sustaining continuity in moments of crisis

In 2021, there wasn't a proper official Schäferlauf, because of Corona – everything was cancelled. There was a small, scaled-down version, but it was more like a sign of loyalty from the town to the event. Because, of course, there couldn't have been a better excuse to just stop doing it. It was kind of like back in 2009, after the financial crisis in 2008, or so. Yeah, Heidenheim – also a Schäferlauf town in Baden-Württemberg – cancelled theirs because of the crisis, and they haven't held it since. So with a crisis like that, or some major event like the financial crisis or Corona, it's always a convenient opportunity to pull out of something like that, to stop being part of it, or to just let it die out. (BU0523_57)

The persistence of the festival in Bad Urach is further reinforced by the narrative surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, the interviewee described a crisis as the perfect opportunity for the city administration to distance itself from such an event; in other words, it is an opportunity to get out of it (*rauskommen*). Nevertheless, while certain festivals were abandoned during periods of economic crisis, the Schäferlauf was maintained. The local city administration remained committed to preserving it. The fact that the festival stayed present in the public consciousness, even when it could not take place in its usual form, reinforced its role as a stabilizing force. In this manner, the Schäferlauf is narrated not merely as a tradition of the past but as a resilient practice that sustains local identity and carries it forward – even in moments of disruption, such as the pandemic.

The quote also shows that this continuity is not a given. A festival can still be cancelled, particularly in times of crisis. Creating continuity requires the active involvement of multiple actors. The city administration plays a crucial role by providing a framework for the event. However, the festival also relies on being passed on and re-performed by the community to remain a vivid event. This was demonstrated in the previous section through individual commitment over several months to prepare for and perform at the festival. The

same applies to the commitment to return to Bad Urach for the Schäferlauf.

4.2.2 Practice of returning: an anchored community in a globalized world

During the Schäferlauf, Bad Urach becomes a place to return to for many of those who have moved away. Interviewees even described attendance as being almost an obligation for Urachers, with one interviewee stating that the personal "mistake" of booking a vacation elsewhere during the Schäferlauf, and consequently missing the event, only happens once (BU0422_23). Thus, the practice of returning to Bad Urach during the Schäferlauf is essential to being an *Alt-Uracher* (which can be loosely translated as the "old Urach people"):

It kind of doesn't work without it, you know? Like, even back then – when I think of old, earlier friends or classmates, who by now have ended up all over the world. But as someone from Urach, or an *Alt-Uracher*, you're expected to be there: for the Schäferlauf, you come home. You're in Urach. (BU0222_21)

This quote demonstrates how strongly Bad Urach's local identity is tied to the Schäferlauf and how returning for the event every two years represents a sense of continuity. The Schäferlauf serves as a stable, recurring temporal and spatial anchor connecting those who stayed with those who moved away. It sustains the continuity of a globally networked community and sense of belonging, which is described here as being an *Alt-Uracher*; in this sense, it functions as a stabilizing anchor of ontological security. These rituals of return situate Bad Urach in a globally connected world, thus illustrating how locally situated subjectivities function in a globalized context. As a Uracher, one can go out into the world but always return. Bad Urach remains a point of reference, a home that is well connected. In this manner, a form of spatial knowledge is produced: a sense of identity grounded in the ability to navigate between leaving the town and returning. In other words, being a Uracher means having a place to come back to, which is a source of ontological security. Following Massey's (2008) notion of a "global sense of place", this anchor is not static; rather, it is shaped through movement, return, and wider relational networks that connect the local to the global. This interplay fosters a particular form of spatial and identity knowledge, one that connects notions of home, self, and security in a globally connected world.

The community of the *Alt-Uracher* is both spatially and temporally situated: through the Schäferlauf, Bad Urach remains connected – not only to the world but also to an imagined past. The return of the *Alt-Uracher* enables the temporary re-creation of this community. The acts of returning can be understood as a form of habitualization, which, as Skey (2010) described, is crucial in "freeing the individual from

the burden of this potentially crippling uncertainty" (Skey, 2010:720) and, therefore, being ontologically secure. In this manner, the role of everyday routines in developing ontological security that was described by Giddens (1991:49) is extended to include ritual practices that are not part of daily life but which, through repetition, assume a form of routine.

4.2.3 Emerging rituals from informal practices

Laurentia is a children's folk song in waltz time, which is always sung by several hundred people together on one evening during the festival in the town square (following the annual theatre performance of the Schäferlauf on the Saturday evening); it is accompanied by a dance with simple choreography. The ritual of *Laurentia* exemplifies the interweaving of practices, material spaces, and notions of continuity. Although this activity is not part of the official Schäferlauf programme and is not promoted by the city, "everyone", as the interviewee explains, knows when *Laurentia* takes place and what is part of the ritual:

Laurentia actually doesn't have that much, I'd say, history or tradition. It came up at some point, I'd say, maybe 50 years ago, not longer than that. Back then, people who were still out and about during Schäferlauf week would meet up at night on the market square and do this *Laurentia* thing – and it's not even a dance, really. You just squat down and stand up again, and the song exists too, like, officially. But nowadays, it's not part of the Schäferlauf's main programme or anything. *Laurentia* isn't in the official programme; it's not promoted by the town, and it's not in the flyer or anything like that. But by now, everyone knows that whenever there's a D'Schäferlies performance – that's a theatre performance – there'll be *Laurentia* too. And now it's even accompanied by the town band. And they dance discofox and so on as well. Yeah. But really, *Laurentia* doesn't have much tradition. (BU0323_129)

As the interviewee explains, the ritual of *Laurentia* emerged from people gathering in the town square during the Schäferlauf – at night, after the official celebrations – and developed into an event accompanied by a brass band. The interviewee was unable to state a specific date but placed its origin at most 50 years ago, thereby emphasizing that it is not that old. For them, *Laurentia* represents an event with little history or tradition. Furthermore, by emphasizing the simplicity of the movements, with the remark that it is not a dance performed there, the interviewee further devalues its status as a (legitimate) tradition.

Although not officially part of the programme, *Laurentia* has been performed and embodied by many participants over the years. As discussed in Sect. 4.1.2, here, we can observe the doing of the Schäferlauf through embodied and situated

practices, particularly through acts of coming together and joint celebrations. The spatial knowledge produced in this context underscores the significance of the physical space in which *Laurentia* takes place. It also illustrates how traditions are continually created and reinforced through these collective practices. The Schäferlauf thus serves as a framework that allows for the emergence of informal practices and rituals that are not part of the official festival programme but that have developed organically over time. These rituals become anchored in specific moments (e.g. after the theatre play) and locations (e.g. the market square); therefore, the place itself becomes central to the ritual.

At the same time, *Laurentia* brings to light the tensions and negotiations underlying the Schäferlauf. This raises the question of whether such informally developed rituals can be considered a real part of the festival. While the festival is a stabilizing anchor that offers ontological security, this stability can still be ambivalent.

4.3 The ambivalences of continuity: Schäferlauf, tradition, and exclusion

While our research in Bad Urach identified the Schäferlauf as an important source of ontological security for many current and former residents, this perspective also has limitations. The festival does not function as a stabilizing anchor for everyone. In our data, other, sometimes more critical, perspectives were also represented and reflected by some residents of Bad Urach.

First, not all residents attributed the same relevance to the festival, and not all embodied practices generated emotional resonance. Our empirical material also points to a degree of disinterest towards the festival, both in terms of active participation and as an audience. The explanations that some interviewees offered were varied and often framed as matters of personal preference or simply not feeling that the festival suited them. One person stated, "I honestly can't relate to the music at all" (BU0723_135). Others explained their distance in more general terms, as, for example, "I don't have that gene" (BU1123_38) to engage actively in the festival, or "I'm not the type for it" (BU1022_41), referring to just attending the festival.

Second, our material also reveals earnest critique of the festival and its traditions. One of the interviewees criticized the continued performance of songs in the *Schäferreigen* that glorify sexualized violence in the context of war, thereby indicating that certain individuals "consciously ignore" (BU0523_47) these problematic elements. Another participant criticized the annual theatre play, highlighting both the author's historical connection to Nazi Germany and the outdated portrayal of women in the performance: "As a woman, you basically can't even watch it, but I think they could modernize it a little" (BU0723_135).

These statements show that the continuity of the festival is also tied to narratives and performances that reproduce sex-

ist patterns rooted in patriarchal gender roles of the past. The disregard of these problematic representations of violence and, more broadly, of women within the festival shows that such continuity can also become destabilizing. In this case, it contributes to a sense of ontological insecurity from the embodied and situated perspective of a woman. These statements indicate that the continuity enacted through the festival is neither uncontested nor universally affirmed. Rather, it is negotiated and, at times, resisted. The statements also show how excluding narratives contribute to embodied and situated feelings of ontological (in)security associated with the festival.

Third, one interviewee explicitly described the perceived exclusions structured along the distinction between the new residential area (*Neubaugebiet*) and the historic core (*alter Ortskern*), echoing established-outsider figurations in the sense of Norbert Elias (Elias and Scotson, 1994):

There is a new residential area and the historic core, and they differ fundamentally. People are always talking about "those or others". So, for me, there is no bridge there, but rather a wall – that is how it feels. And what I find very sad, and that is why I mentioned the children's festival (*Kinderfest*), is that one is not integrated into these local circumstances, into traditions, into festivals, or into rituals, whatever that may be – into something cultural, or into something that is lived. (BU0823_45)

The participant who lived in the new residential area, and thus positioned herself as a newcomer to Bad Urach, emphasized that she was denied the possibility of active participation in local traditions. She described the relation between these two places as a wall (*Mauer*). The quote therefore suggests that access to some activities is made more difficult for those who have not "always" lived in the town or who do not have long-standing family ties there. From this perspective, the festival and related cultural practices do not automatically generate ontological security but may instead reinforce boundaries and exclusions.

As we have shown throughout this paper, ontological security at the Schäferlauf functions through embodied and place-based practices. This also means that what is done can be done differently. The emergence of informal practices, such as *Laurentia*, illustrates how the Schäferlauf remains a living framework in which new rituals can take shape. At the same time, the critique raises the question of how Schäferlauf produces a specific form of *continuity*: one that has the capacity to exclude.

If we understand heritage as a present-day practice with a contemporary function, rather than as a reproduction of a *fixed* past, these critiques also highlight the possibility, and the need, for further change. This would include examining how narratives of continuity are challenged or transformed over time, how the festival changes in response to critique, and how a traditional festival might actively engage with

questions of exclusion, as well as with the ways in which broader societal and structural changes affect its role as a framework for ontological security.

5 Conclusion

Narratives of ontological security often entail stories of continuity and can thus be related to narratives of heritage. As heritage scholars have revealed, built heritage sites can serve as anchors of ontological security. Similarly, we demonstrated how such reassuring narratives and the formation of stable identities are produced through the Schäferlauf festival – both in terms of biographical continuity for individuals and in shaping the identity of the place. In this sense, the festival re-creates the past through the historical narratives of Bad Urach, thus embedding them within a traditional celebration that re-enacts and updates established rites.

However, our research revealed that these stabilizing anchors are not merely discursive, nor simply narratives that individuals tell themselves to maintain a sense of continuity and security. Rather, they can also be understood as something that is *done*. We demonstrated that ontological security is deeply connected to embodied, situated, and place-based practices. Based on our findings, we highlighted three elements of ontological security as "doing": first, the festival creates a framework for communities of practice that emerge through close, direct interactions during the active preparation and participation in the event. These communities foster long-term social relationships through shared activities in the Schäferlauf. Second, we showed that ontological security is embedded in embodied and material practices. Specifically, it reaches into the body through its entanglement with the material world (e.g. by stepping into traditional costumes that have been passed on). These small interactions and physical enactments contribute to a deeply felt, embodied sense of ontological security that goes beyond the discursive narratives we often encounter in interviews. People do not just talk about their connections. They "do" them, perform them, and feel them in and through their bodies. Third, we revealed that these practices are situated and anchored in specific physical locations, such as the market square or clubhouses.

Finally, what is produced here is a form of spatial knowledge that reflects a sense of security in a globally connected world. A specific spatial identity emerges: being a Uracher means always having the possibility of returning. Many people no longer live in the town or do not live there permanently; however, they retain a sense of home, a place they can always come back to. One can leave Bad Urach and, at the same time, one is always invited to return. Being rooted in this manner is mediated through the festival itself. At the same time, the act of returning highlights the entanglement of the local with the global. In this sense, the festival serves as a stabilizing anchor for subjective ontological security. However, it is important to acknowledge that this stabilizing force

can also maintain exclusions and reproduce existing power relations. This can be the case when, as we showed above, subjective experiences of security are grounded in narratives of continuity that emphasize non-change, thereby essentializing local identities and upholding existing structures that might be patriarchal or racist, for example, and thus actively exclude and produce "others". These ambivalences do not negate the sense of security that the festival offers, but they do call for a critical evaluation of the ways in which the processes of securitization are produced and maintained. While our study provides valuable insights into the material and embodied dimensions of ontological security, future research should explore how practices that stabilize some can exclude others, including how attachment to continuity may itself be a mechanism of boundary making.

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