

# Social Hotspots and Sacred Places of Post-Migrant Society: An Encounter With Spaces for “Democratic” Transformation Based on Anne Weber’s Wanderings Through the *banlieues* of Paris

Space and Culture

1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/12063312251392339

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Isabelle Stauffer<sup>1</sup> , Martin Kirschner<sup>1</sup>,  
and Joost van Loon<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

Anne Weber’s reportage novel *Bannmeilen* highlights many current conflicts: social inequality and marginalization, the unresolved colonial history, the failed integration policy, traces of the Shoah and environmental destruction. Together with her friend Thierry, a documentary filmmaker from the *banlieues*, Anne immerses herself in the suburbs of Paris. This article reads her writing as a form of action research, that not simply seeks to understand but also to intervene, and as a modality of practicing place. Similar to Michel de Certeau—who regards walking as a form of subversive performative appropriation of space—Anne and Thierry open up with their walks a view to a different “post-migrant” Europe. They encounter refugee camps, which reveal not only the fragility but also the dark side and inherent violence of Western democracies. They find social housing, which have been transit camps for Jewish people; they encounter a café as a micro-democratic meeting place and they explore churches and cemeteries as spaces of remembrance and of resonance. Thus, on one hand, the *banlieues* appear as “zones of exception” in Giorgio Agamben’s sense, where people are reduced to bare life, and state repression intensifies along racial and social lines; on the other hand, however, places are emerging where life is asserting itself in resistance, alternatives are becoming visible and situations of repression are being transcended. *Bannmeilen* itself can be read as an artistic and spiritual intervention in the political sphere that opens up small spaces for encounters for “democratic” transformation.

## Keywords

Anne Weber, micro-politics, postcolonial, sacred places, walking

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<sup>1</sup>Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany

### Corresponding Author:

Isabelle Stauffer, Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Universitätsallee 1, 85072 Eichstätt, Germany.

Email: [isabelle.stauffer@ku.de](mailto:isabelle.stauffer@ku.de)

## Action Research as Practicing Place

The north-eastern suburbs of Paris are among the poorest areas of France. In 2005, they were the initial site of riots that spread to suburbs all over the country. On October 27, 2005, two young people died under suspicious circumstances in the Paris suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis. They had hidden in a transformer station and died of electric shocks. The rumor spread that the police had chased them to death, as a response to which riots broke out (Falksohn et al., 2005). Many present conflicts dwell in these suburbs. The unresolved colonial history—intensified by a failed integration policy—is interwoven with hidden traces of the Shoah and the environmental destruction caused by the many highways, airports, and the omnipresent mountains of garbage.

Seine-Saint-Denis is the name of a heterotopia that is above all marked by violent agonistique. Layers of untold and repressed histories pile up without being resolved. When the street is “democracy’s greatest arena” (Solnit, 2001, p. 315), then walking through these places inevitably invokes the violence of place as a territory that reveals the structure of sovereign power as Agamben (2017) traces it in his studies on Homo Sacer. In zones where constituted rule threatens to reduce people to their bare lives, also the “destituent potential” becomes tangible, in which Agamben recognizes the possibility of a different, emergent politics that does not lie in revolutionary action, but in small and vulnerable practices that remain heterogeneous to the system, enable contact, keep memories and hopes alive, and create heterotopias of a different kind of coexistence.<sup>1</sup> Encountering such a place does not invite the distant, objectifying gaze of spectatorial realism, which more often than not still haunts ethnographic research, despite countless post-colonial and feminist critiques (cf. Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Haraway, 1988). Instead, they demand action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001): forms of research that are transformative interventions, even if they only consist of “micro events.” Action research is transformative not because it already knows what is to be done, but exactly because it stresses the undetermined character of encountering.

Walking, as practicing place, is a resistant “micro-practice” (Biserna, 2022, p. 22) and an opening up to modes of encountering that are undetermined—it is a relational practice, exposing us to the world and others (Biserna, 2022). In agonistic places, every encounter is an intervention, because they entail a risk of exposing the objectifying gaze as hostile, either as a provocation or as an extension of state-violence. This is why walking in agonistic places is itself a political intervention, and rendering an account of it by recording or reflecting, then becomes a form of action research.

Action research echoes Marx and Engels’ eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (Marx & Engels, 1970). The core activity of action research is to connect analysis, interpretation and intervention (often misunderstood as “solving problems”). It is a highly interactive engagement in which researchers and researched cease to be separate entities (often referred to as “participatory action research”). In this sense, it is a living method (*méthode in vivo*, Paillard, 2008).

Whereas in many methodology handbooks, action research is presented as a distinctive research method (McNiff, 2005), it is at its core not different from established approaches such as ethnography and *Realexperimente* (real-world experiments). What defines action research is that it explicitly combines intervention and participation. As every form of research is always-already an intervention and every form of research already contains participatory elements, the only difference is its explicitation, which makes it political. Walking as practicing place—encountering places and non-places—is juxtaposed onto forensics, for example in terms of archeology as well as crime scenes, official and unofficial acts of commemoration, contemplation, and critical reflection. Action research is thus a form of practicing place.

This article focuses on spaces for “democratic” transformation in a literary text, which immerses in the *banlieues* with a praxis, which we read as a kind of action research: *Bannmeilen*:

*Ein Roman in Streifzügen* (Weber 2024), by the Paris-based author Anne Weber, who writes in German and in French.<sup>2</sup> Action research as practicing place is not bound by disciplines. Writing and filming are just as much interventions that expose the inherent violence of place (in analogy to the violence of language, cf. Lecerclé, 1990). Because—as opposed to the big noise of media entertainment and performative politics—the encounters of action research are often small events, their transformative potential is often overlooked. It is not necessarily the political, however, where these transformations take place, but instead, the aesthetic and spiritual ethos of encountering might be where action research as practicing place makes a difference.

What is of central interest to us here, is the specificity of place in processes of social-spatialization that are also, at the same time, practices of micro-politics (in the broader context of transformations of—for want of a better word—democracy). Reading it this way, the micro-political interventions in Anne Weber's *Bannmeilen* raise the following questions: What do the places visited and described in this book say about the state of European so-called democracies today, especially in light of the erosion of human rights as an underlying condition of the homo sacer in post-migrant Europe (Agamben, 2017; Bauman, 2011)? What specific perspective and insight does the practice of walking-encountering through and with the peripheries generate? What contribution can art and religion make to the actualization of a “democracy” that had been promised but never existed? Finally, what kind of *action research* does walking entail when it is explored as political, spiritual, and aesthetic forms of practicing place?

To answer these questions, in the first section, we explain the specific writing-style of *Bannmeilen* as a reportage novel and the artistic tradition in which the novel is situated. In the second section, we examine social hotspots (refugee camps, social housing) as zones of non-being with traces of colonial history and the Holocaust, where people are reduced to their bare lives and whose (non-)functionalities radiate systemic spatial oppression. Third, we turn to sacred places and a café as places of remembrance, resistance, and a forum for interaction. The fourth section concerns the medium of the book in a digital society as a space for artistic-political intervention. To conclude, we examine what kind of action research *Bannmeilen* performs against a politics of fear.

## ***Bannmeilen* as Reportage Novel in the Tradition of *Flânerie* and *Dérive***

In *Bannmeilen* Anne Weber roams, the notorious suburbs of Paris with her friend Thierry, a documentary filmmaker who grew up in the *banlieues* and whose father is from Algeria. These suburbs are separated from the city center by the *Périphérique*, a highway ring road that, alongside “other invisible walls,” [. . .] divides the urban space into “inside” and “outside,” into those-inside and those-outside” (Weber, 2024, p. 8). When Thierry, who is to make a film about the effects of the Olympic Games on the *banlieues*, asks her to accompany him, she realizes that although she has traveled to distant continents, she has remained “blind to the foreign and different in close proximity” (Weber, 2024, p. 10).

With her “walking where no one walks”, Weber (2024, p. 175) exposes herself to the realities and conditions of the *banlieues*. Walking as a form of action research also entails a vulnerability, which is intensified by the fact that Anne is a white woman. Whereas she draws on the tradition of the *flânerie* of Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire and, in particular, Guillaume Apollinaire, who walked through the Parisian suburbs and turned graffiti into poetry (Henschen, 2020), she is not able to vanish into the background as easily as these men could (Wilson, 1992). “[W]alking in urban space, for women and minoritized genders, means acquiring an often unwanted visibility, exposing oneself to sexual harassment, the fear of violence” (Biserma, 2022, p. 34). But not only the female equivalent of the *flâneur* faces problems: several material geographies of

exclusion intersect with each other. The *Attempt at a Psychogeographical Description of Les Halles* (1958) of the Algerian Situationist Abdelhafid Khatib could never be finished because there was a nighttime curfew imposed on North African People. Starting from the detached observation of the *flâneur*, the Dadaists and Situationists with their *dérive* (drifting) developed more participating forms of walking with the aim to generate a transformation (Biserna, 2022; Serafini, 2018). The demands of the latter were also sometimes found as graffiti on the walls of buildings (Chlada, 2002).<sup>3</sup> Especially, Guy Debord, one of the founders of the Situationist International, used walking as a revolutionary tool. His *Psychogeographic Guide of Paris* and his *The Naked City* (both 1957) are means to collapse art into politics and to transgress official representations of space (Biserna, 2022). Read in this tradition, Anne's and Thierry's forays are a post-migrant *dérive* that deals with social conflicts, narratives, identity politics and social and political transformations that occur after migration and reflect the socially established dividing line between migrants and non-migrants (cf. Foroutan, 2018).

In their book *Paris. Invisible City* (2006), Latour and Hermant (2006, p. 1) also “wandered through the city” and used photographic-ethnography as their method of data generation. Like Anne and Thierry, they visited “places usually hidden from passers-by” to explore the margins of knowledge and visibility as well as the nature of social relations.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Anne and Thierry, however, they could afford to have their explorations be led by curiosity. They did not engage that much in action research because their encounters remained spectatorial. Instead, their project was forensic: they were interested in uncovering the hidden structures that make Paris a functional city. Georges Perec describes in *Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (1975)—part of his project *Places* (1969–1975)—the place *Saint-Sulpice* in Paris. As with Anne Weber, this is an everyday experiment, but not in a narrative form, rather in a list format and ostensibly objective, to capture the place in the deeply ordinary and sharpen the perception of the reading audience (Scheffel, 2023).

Weber's fusion of walking and storytelling also resonates with Michel de Certeau (1984), who understands walking as an act of utterance. For him, walking is a form of subversive performative appropriation of space. It is only through walking that places become spaces. Walking generates ambivalence and becomes “the other's blazon” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 194) through the incessant change it encounters. Those who wander through the city often immerse themselves in its confusing life and depend on “tactics” of everyday life and survival, without being able to gain strategic access to reality from a bird's eye view. Indeed, the vulnerability of encounter is the inauguration of transformative potential. As the late Pope Francis repeatedly emphasized, anyone who turns from the “center” to the periphery acquires a new perspective on the whole. Those who do this on foot experience the dissection and destruction of the landscape and the living environment of the people who are sacrificed to the “mobility” between the centers (Krebs, 2019). Walking through—or perhaps better expressed as walking-practicing—the places that shape the lives and everyday experiences of people in these overlooked “zones of non-being,”<sup>5</sup> opens up a view “from below” and “from within” to a different post-migrant Europe, one that is itself marked by the colonial violence it has inflicted on other countries.

Despite the subtitle *novel*, there are some things about Weber's *Bannmeilen* that are more typical of factual (which does not necessarily mean factually correct) rather than fictional narration. For example, the author, the autodiegetic first-person narrator and the main character Anne are presented as identical; the narrative is embedded in a real spatiotemporal context and the narrator only ever knows for sure about her own thoughts and feelings (Martínez & Scheffel, 2020). Factual narration also invokes references to real events and objects (Galle, 2016), that are also accessible outside the text (Martínez & Scheffel, 2020), which affirms that is a reportage novel. As is typical of the genre, there is a proximity to (social) scientific methods due to the process of observing and generalizing details (Jakobi, 2009). The “intention to inform about unknown conditions and everyday occurrences beyond major historical events” (Jakobi, 2009, p. 603)

connects the reportage novel with travel literature, whereby Weber skillfully links these everyday occurrences with historical events from colonial history and the Holocaust, such as the Algerian War (1954–1962) and the Vichy regime (1940–1944).

Programmatic self-reflection, as is characteristic of the genre (Jakobi, 2009), is also present. Right from the start Anne explains that both she and Thierry take on roles in their conversations that they also repeatedly ironize. Thierry plays the “faithful, traditional Algerian that he is not” and Anne the “white, Western, privileged woman that I am” (Weber, 2024, p. 23). This sometimes leads to conflicts, for example, when they discuss Aït Ahmed, the leader of the Algerian National Liberation Front. These conflicts are important to show the rewriting of traditional myths of colonization (Osthues, 2017) as a process of becoming aware. Reflecting on racist and classist stereotypes also includes the parodic imitation of Anne’s imaginary *blasé* Parisian friends:

They’re just lazy, these people, says Thierry sarcastically, they have it too easy. You see, all they do is stand around outside and claim welfare.

Me: That’s right, you give them a blower, and the leaves get swept up all by themselves, without any effort, and it makes noise and costs money and is bad for the earth. They could just as easily blow them away themselves! (Weber, 2024, p. 39)

This comic component of self-persiflage and the ironic imitation of others emphasizes the fictional and aesthetic component of the *Bannmeilen*, since such things rarely occur in (social) scientific studies (Plath, 2024). At the same time, the performative element blends into the genre of the reportage novel, however, also highlights that the references to social scientific and historical research are not merely spectatorial. They are methodically *enacted* as practicing place. The ironic reflection is the inauguration of action research because it no longer seeks to merely report but to intervene and transform.

## Social Hotspots as Zones of Systemic Spatial Oppression

On their walks, Anne and Thierry often encounter social hotspots such as refugee camps and social housings. On roadside in Stains, Anne and Thierry notice an “enclosure, a kind of tent, surrounded by a wall of garbage” behind a “mountain of hundreds of rusty cans” and a “mountain of empty plastic bottles”—“it looks like hell” (Weber, 2024, p. 41). In literature, hell is often regarded as a synonym for concentration camp—not least because of the comparison with Dante’s hell in his *Divine Comedy* (Hölter, 2002; Taterka, 1999). Refugees have to live in the hell discovered by Anne Weber. Anne and Thierry also find “a Roma settlement, a fenced-in shantytown, [. . .] a patchwork of overlapping plastic tarpaulins that seem to be attached to a wooden structure” (Weber, 2024, p. 48). It is not the only terrible place where refugees are forced to live: African homeless people settled down between the four strands of Boulevard Ney, sitting “huddled together on cardboard boxes [. . .]. Apparently these three couldn’t find a quieter, more sheltered spot in the whole city [. . .]” (Weber, 2024, p. 57). On Île-Saint-Denis, in a former cement factory, “around five hundred people, mainly from Chad and Sudan, have been living for three years” (Weber, 2024, p. 211). Two months later, Anne and Thierry find the building emptied, fenced in and guarded by barbed wire. The residents have been driven away because of its proximity to the Olympic village. Anne wonders where they might have gone to.

The walkers enter here those “zones of non-being” in which the fundamental “right to have a right”<sup>6</sup> is jeopardized, people being reduced to their bare lives. Giorgio Agamben (2017) has exposed this in his studies on *Homo Sacer* as the reverse side of the sovereign relationship that is the very foundation of the legal order. The figure of the sovereign that establishes order cannot

be separated from the other figure of the “homo sacer”: people who, having been (de-)placed (Aretz, 2025) outside of order, are included in it as the excluded, robbed of their social rights and reduced to their bare lives. The legal status of refugees in refugee camps is dubious (Geulen, 2005). What happens in these spaces is no longer legally secure, but depends on the civility and ethical sense of the police, who temporarily act as sovereigns in them (Geulen, 2005, p. 112). The camp is the place “where the state begins to dissolve from within” (Geulen, 2005, p. 107). Following Agamben (2017, pp. 148–192), such lawless spaces show not only the fragility of democracy but its inherent “shadow,” as the Western concept of rule and governance based on sovereignty produces the form of included exclusion and the production of bare life, of which the camp is the paradigm. The legacy and the present reality of the colonial violence that was unleashed from Europe is visible in the situation of the refugees and in the precarious situation of the post-migrant societies on the outskirts of the big cities in the middle of Europe:

These other “Europes” exist in the suburbs of Vienna and Zurich, of Paris and Milan, of Amsterdam and Barcelona, of Oslo and Lampedusa, London and Istanbul, Moscow, and Berlin. In those non-places and their night alleys and subway tunnels, it is possible to find another humanity, denied, racialized, criminalized, and turned into cheap labor for the jobs that the Europe of privilege is not prepared to face. (Mendoza-Álvarez, 2022, p. 469)

These non-places, however, are unlike Marc Augé’s (1995) deployment of the term, not de-politicized spaces without identity, but quite the opposite, they are de-placed outside of what can be recognized as the political, as part of a “space of exception” that engenders the state of emergency in which arbitrary violence conditions and secures the Rule of Law.

In the case of the Cité de la Muette in Drancy, Anne Weber wonders whether its history “doesn’t say something about the nature of this type of mass housing per se” (Weber, 2024, pp. 186–187). This Cité had been “planned in the 1930s as a model of progressive, social housing” (Weber, 2024, p. 187). In Vichy France, the almost completed settlement became a transit camp for Jewish people who were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau between 1942 and 1944 and for the most part murdered. The Cité was then “returned to its original humane and progressive purpose” (Weber, 2024, p. 187) and still serves as social housing today. “But aren’t more or less all large apartment blocks ideally suited as camps, indeed, aren’t they basically already camps by their very nature, which only need to be renamed, closed and guarded to reveal themselves as such?” (Weber, 2024, p. 187), asks Anne Weber, thereby placing a critical footnote to the very notions of “humane” and “progressive” that are allegedly covered by adding the adjective “social” to the management of housing. This resonates with Guy Debord (1967/2014, p. 92) *The Society of the Spectacle* which recognized the nightmare of the new cities in the suburbs of Paris:

Now for the first time a new architecture has been designed specifically *for the poor*. The aesthetic poverty and vast proliferation of this new experience in habitation stem from its *mass* character, which character in turn stems both from its function and from the modern conditions of construction. The obvious core of these conditions is the *authoritarian decisionmaking* which abstractly converts the environment into an environment of abstraction.

The housing machines radiated alienation and uniformity, and crime and neglect reigned within them (Stahlhut et al., 2007). The Situationist Constant (2015, p. 163) even called them “cemeteries of reinforced concrete.”

Weber thinks the refugee camps of today, the historical transit camps of Vichy France and social housing together due to their spatial proximity or even congruence, thus revealing the contempt for humanity inherent in their functionality and in the de-placing and non-belonging of their inhabitants.

Such dystopian places reveal the negative side of normality as experienced in the centers: the violence, exploitation, and everyday exclusion that the dominant order produces. They show “the systemic oppression co-produced with space and spatial practices, generation regimes of hyper-visibility or invisibility” (Biserna, 2022, p. 8). But they also point to the lived-traumatic past that refuses to pass and continues to have an effect precisely where it is repressed and not remembered: colonial history is interwoven here with the violence of National Socialism and repressed collaboration, up to the catastrophe of the systematic annihilation of European Jews. This encounter sows the seed of the suspicion that the difference between genocide and racialized urban planning is perhaps merely gradual. This is the suspicion that the *homo sacer* is far from holy and exceptional, but merely the bare life to which we can all be reduced once we are identified as “surplus to requirement” or simply “an obstacle.” This makes it all the more urgent to ask—in a radical dialectical moment—whether such “non-places” on the peripheries can still cultivate of hope and survival and become “other-places” (heterotopias), where the experience of a different humane life is possible. This kind of hope is not cultivated in idealism, but in the aesthetic and spiritual ethos of encountering the *homo sacer* in others and ourselves. This is the real basis of action research as practicing place. The universal condition of *homo sacer* becomes visible in the micro-political events of its encountering, by simultaneously bearing witness to that “remnant” which remains and can neither be represented nor destroyed (Agamben, 2017, pp. 761–876).

### **Sacred Places and a Café as Places of Remembrance, Resistance, and a Forum for Interaction**

The two walkers often encounter sacred places. This is no coincidence, because—as de Certeau (1982) emphasizes—the restless walker is related to the mystic: the wanderer who leaves the familiar and the motherland is (in Abraham) the archetype of faith. It is not the identification with faith or the “possession” of God, but the pilgrimage of the “wounded traveller,” who misses God and cannot be “without” the other and is dependent on hospitality, which leads to the trail of the sacred (Eckholt, 2020). The departure from the slave house and the journey through the desert shapes the faith of Israel, and Christians also see themselves as pilgrims and “strangers without citizenship” (1 Peter 1:17), whose true home is in heaven (Hebrews 11f) and who therefore must not settle down in the given, but orient themselves toward the coming kingdom. In a Lenten sermon, Giorgio Agamben (2018) has recalled this messianic dimension to a church that constantly runs the risk of settling in the penultimate in alliance with the powerful. In Islam, pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars. However, such an Abrahamic mysticism of pilgrimage does not imply a form of spirituality that is disembodied and without location. On the contrary, the wandering is concrete, embodied, and situated, and at the same time brings with it a movement that activates and transforms the concrete places and the power relations that shape them, and transcends them into an open space. Nowhere, this is more evident than in churches, where prayer “creates a sacral space” organizing it “with gestures, that give a place its dimensions and a person a religious ‘orientation’” (de Certeau, 2009, p. 33), and in cemeteries, as places of remembrance that grant the dead a place in the community of the living.

The sacred places that Anne and Thierry encounter are churches and cemeteries. These are places of memory in Pierre Nora’s (1984, p. XXIV) sense, places of French collective memory, they are “remains,” “rituals of a society without rituals, the transient sacralities of a desacralizing society.”<sup>7</sup> However, they are also places of remembrance of Christianity, which is itself a “religion of remembrance” (Markschies & Wolf, 2010, p. 15). Christoph Marxschies and Hubert Wolf (2010, p. 21) define Christian places of remembrance as “all places, persons, events, institutions and texts where the memory of Jesus Christ has been concentrated in a special way in the course

of history”. Churches are among the most important places of remembrance in Christianity. As a place of assembly, they are the place of remembrance of a community and, through the church records, the memory of a congregation. Together with the cemetery—even if it is in a different location—churches connect the living with the dead and preserve their memory (François, 2010). In Catholic churches, this connection is also expressed in the fact that the relic of a martyr or a saint is placed on the altar (cf. Rev 6:9): The celebration of communion lives from the connection to the dead; the faith of the present is nourished by the hopes of the past and for the past; in the belief that the dead and the victims of the past have a future in God, life can be celebrated and transformed in the here and now. At the center of this is Christ as the risen crucified one, who was executed by the religious and political powers of his time, but is celebrated by the faithful as the real “Lord,” raised by God above all powers and authorities (1 Cor 2, 7f; Col 1f; cf. Wink, 1992). This form of memory is a “dangerous memory” (Metz, 2007, 2016, cf. Rober, 2013), which does not nostalgically glorify the past, but rather gains ethical and political orientation for the present from the memory of the suffering and the unfulfilled promises of the past. Churches are often also political places of remembrance and thus “places of protection, refuge and resistance against injustice and dictatorship” (François, 2010, p. 722).

There are churches everywhere in the Parisian suburbs that Anne and Thierry explore. The churches are “tiny” and bear witness to the fact that “although the Catholic Church was still considered at the time, it had actually long since disappeared from the daily lives of suburban inhabitants” (Weber, 2024, p. 13). The mosques are “mostly invisible because they are placed very inconspicuously in a modern house or backyard” (Weber, 2024, p. 75).<sup>8</sup> Unlike the churches, which are mostly empty and sometimes even closed, the great mosque of Aulnay is poured out by “hundreds, but they seem like thousands” (Weber, 2024, p. 280). The result is a peculiar tension: on one hand, the architectural presence of the Christian churches, which are only rarely visited, but whose symbolism and architecture remain gestures of prayer turned to stone and places of remembrance. On the other hand, there is the hidden, barely visible presence of the mosques, which are full of worshippers and are associated with the everyday gesture of daily prayer as a duty of devout Muslims. What from a strategic perspective and hegemonic logic may appear as competition between two religions in the public sphere and as a threat to one’s own identity that can be instrumentalized politically, is shown to the wanderers in the perspective of everyday practice of a life on the periphery as resources of a hope that brings people together and gives them a home in the harshness of everyday life, the actualization of the universal condition of the homo sacer, whereby those living in precarious conditions in the invocation of God abandon neither their dead nor their own longing for life and recognition.

One of the churches they come across is the concrete church of Saint-Yves in La Courneuve. In this church, Anne discovers a book of thanksgiving and intercessions. At the end of the novel, she returns to this church because of this book. At first, she only pretends to pray, “[a]nd behold, after a while I pray. You don’t need to learn how to pray. You don’t even have to be a believer to do it” (Weber, 2024, p. 299). As Michel de Certeau (2009, p. 33) asserts: “Prayer creates a sacred space for itself,” while “organising these spaces with the gestures that give a place its dimensions and a person a religious ‘orientation.’” The spiritual thereby paradoxically refers to the concrete, to the materiality of places and the physicality of gestures: “When prayer endeavours to encounter God, the rendezvous always takes place on the earth of man, at the intersection of his body and his soul” (de Certeau, 2009, p. 33). Anne writes an intercession in German in this book and asks to do justice to the people she has met, as well as to her friend Thierry, and for her story to be successful. Her journey is only just beginning, and she will tell us about it (Weber, 2024). This book in the church refers to the Bible as the Christian “original place of memory” (Brummer, 2010, p. 614) and is at the same time a *mise en abyme*, a self-referential reflection, for the book Weber is writing, the *Bannmeilen*. The book ends with the performative gesture of prayer, which expresses what necessarily remains unavailable to the author and what makes writing a risk: that

she does justice to the people she has met; that it is not a voyeuristic endeavor, but an invitation to a change of perspective that readers can share.

A graffiti near the town hall of Bobigny “dieu / dieu / dieu” (Weber, 2024, p. 153), which Anne Weber—like Guillaume Apollinaire and the Situationists once did—includes in her work of art (*Bannmeilen*), points to the gesture of a silent invocation toward God. Shortly before she comes across this graffiti, she is surrounded by a “swarm” of children, of whom she is afraid.<sup>9</sup> She explains this fear with the wasteland, coldness and emptiness in which they wander, with her “feeling of foreignness” and her “view of a non-suburban dweller distorted by everything she has ever read and heard about cites and dealers and revenge killings” (Weber, 2024, p. 152). In *Explosive Modernity*, Eva Illouz (2024, p. 205) explains that fear can be misused “to draw and reinforce a border between locals and outsiders or to pariah certain groups by claiming that they pose a danger to the community”. Fear, Illouz writes, always offers advantages to right-wing politics. It helps to legitimize surveillance mechanisms, repression, and mechanisms of exclusion. Fear can turn society into a theater of war, which is directly related to the current crisis of democracy (Illouz, 2024). Weber (2024, p. 12) demonstrates this political instrumentalization of fear very clearly when she quotes Nicolas Sarkozy, who said in 2005 in the face of a shooting in the Cité des 4000 in La Courneuve that he would clean this settlement with a “Kärcher.” The violence of the expression comes to light when realizing that he refers to a high-pressure device as a metaphor for aggressive, indiscriminate, careless and forceful “cleaning.” Sarkozy was emotionally aligned with the anxiety of the state over “dangerous matter out of place” that needed to be erased by force.

The invocation of fear through a rhetoric of endangerment (Ungar, 1998) echoes the omnipresence of risk. Risk has the ambivalent capacity to both depoliticize (e.g. in the language of governmentality and technoscience) and repoliticize (e.g. in the language of securitization and criminalization). This is because risks operate like pathogens, challenging the immunity of a political order, without identifying themselves as either stemming from-without or from-within (Van Loon, 2002). The state of risks is neither factual nor fictional, they iterate between information and anticipation. It is through the frame of risk that the sovereignty of the state is challenged. It is through the frame of risk that the homo sacer is revealed.

In his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, the late Pope Francis refers to this as a “politics of fear”: “Our world is trapped in a strange contradiction: we believe that we can ‘ensure stability and peace through a false sense of security sustained by a mentality of fear and mistrust.’” He relates this to the experience that even today:

outside the ancient town walls lies the abyss, the territory of the unknown, the wilderness. Whatever comes from there cannot be trusted, for it is unknown, unfamiliar, not part of the village. It is the territory of the “barbarian,” from whom we must defend ourselves at all costs. As a result, new walls are erected for self-preservation, the outside world ceases to exist and leaves only “my” world, to the point that others, no longer considered human beings possessed of an inalienable dignity, become only “them.” (Francis, 2020, No. 26f.)

The counter-model of fraternity and (also political) love that transcends borders that he argues for is not based on a religious identity or a self-assured faith, but on the ability to become a neighbor to the other, to the stranger who lies shattered by the wayside. In the parable of the Samaritan (Lc 10:25-37), which forms the starting point of Francis’ argument, walking in an area exposed to bandits becomes the primal situation of a “mysticism of mercy,” in that, the half-dead other touches the stranger wanderer “in his innards,” so that he stands by him across all social barriers and becomes his neighbor, although he is himself an outsider and despised.<sup>10</sup> Such “mysticism of mercy” unites Jews, Christians and Muslims—and it unites people of all faiths in their humanity. The late Pope Francis concludes his letter with a call for peaceful coexistence in brotherhood,

which he addressed to all people of good will together with the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in Abu Dabhi in 2019. It is in this ethos, that Michel de Certeau argues that it is by opening up to others, exposing oneself to them in weakness and vulnerability, that a practice or theory may become “Christian.” When “the risk arises of exposing oneself to exteriority, or the openness to the unexpected strangeness that arises, or the grace to make room for the other, that is, to believe him” (de Certeau, 2009, p. 250).

As a form of practicing place, action research always invokes risks as it encounters heterotopia. Michel Foucault (1986, p. 24), describes heterotopias as “counter-sites [. . .], effectively enacted utopia in which [. . .] all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” In the novel, cemeteries exemplify this heterotopic condition extremely well. Indeed, for Foucault (1986, p. 25) cemeteries are an “‘the other city,’ where each family possesses its dark resting place.” This is because the cemetery “is however connected with all the sites of the city-state or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery” (Foucault, 1986, p. 25).

Colonies are also heterotopias (Foucault, 1986). There are clear traces of colonial history in the cemeteries of the *banlieues*. In the Muslim cemetery of Bobigny, for example, lies the grave of Boughéra El Ouafi, an Algerian athlete who won the gold medal in the marathon for France in 1928. Based on El Ouafi’s story, who for colonial political reasons belonged neither to France nor to Algeria and died violently in poverty in the *banlieues*, Weber (2024) mentions Frantz Fanon, a founding figure of postcolonial theory, who described this situation of non-belonging in his works. The Muslim cemetery with El Ouafi’s grave lies impious between a landscape of rubble and a scrapyard. In the same cemetery lie the graves of the 250,000 Muslim soldiers who crossed the Mediterranean between 1943 and 1945 and made up half of the French liberation army (Weber, 2024). Despite Olympic medals and the liberation of the country, around 1960 Algeria was still part of France, but “the Algerians had a different status to the French, they did not have full civil rights, it was a kind of apartheid” (Weber, 2024, pp. 96–97). Colonial empires construct spatially specific hierarchies between notions of citizenship, gender, class or race and religion, not just in terms of rhetoric, but in the micro-political practices of social spatialization. This happens both in the colonial periphery and at home in the metropole (Körner, 2019).

For Weber, the sacred places become spaces of remembrance—not only of Christianity, but also of Islam—and thus of the injustice that Christian (and post-Christian “secular”) people have done or continue to do to other peoples. Mendoza-Álvarez, a theologian who works with the relatives of disappeared people in Mexico, speaks of the search for the dead and their memory as a practice of remembering, recognizing the dead and victims as members of the community of the living: “This performativity reconstructs the life of the dis-membered bodies through narratives of re-remembering lives that matter” (Mendoza-Álvarez, 2022, p. 466). Remembering affirms the “grievability” (Butler, 2020) of those treated as “wasted lives” (Bauman, 2011) and their dignity as “lives that matter.” “There is therefore nothing more political—in the most radical and anarchic sense of the word—than celebrating the dead as if they were alive, placed in the memory of the community of survivors” (Mendoza-Álvarez, 2024, p. 58).

In Saint-Denis, Anne and Thierry find a “unique refuge” (Weber, 2024, p. 292), the café *Le Montjoie*. It is “the only real café [. . .], more ‘real’ than all the Parisian cafés I know” (Weber, 2024, p. 51), says Anne, “a family-like, but outwardly open structure” (Weber, 2024, p. 80). This place feels “homely,” “like a miracle” (Weber, 2024, pp. 50, 51). All kinds of people come there. They meet each other in a friendly manner, listen to each other and discuss their different opinions about God and the world, colonialism, migration, and democracy:

[T]he light bulb man [. . .] begins one of his apocalyptic monologues [. . .]: The government will fall, he says, we’ll finish off those rich bastards, and besides, we don’t need a government at all. [. . .]

The Serb orders another beer and disagrees: Yes, yes, we do need a government, but the politicians are all the same, nothing will ever change.

They're not all the same, I say, once Le Pen is in power, things will be different, we'll see.

Do you think so? He's skeptical, but says that at least there will be more order. [. . .]

I say: But that doesn't fit together with the poor migrants who just want a better life. They are already in a bad situation and will be the first to suffer.

He doesn't believe that, sees no contradiction in his speeches, and will probably vote for Le Pen. (Weber, 2024, p. 200)

Weber's café is "a forum of interactions with strangers, a platform for facing, recognising and alighting difference and complexity in the public sphere, all interpreted as key elements of political life" (Biserna, 2022, p. 32). According to Pierre Nora (1992), the café is also a place of remembrance. Through the peaceful intercultural and interreligious encounters, Weber's café becomes a heterotopic space as a realized utopia.

Of course, the blending of poetic license and ethnographic methods—writing culture so to speak—may invoke romanticized, even orientalist, clichés. We have to understand this not as a factual description of a sacred refuge, but dialectically, as a moment of encountering that which Sarkozy had tried to forcefully remove: the moment when homo sacer is revealed as the stranger-within-ourselves. Action research as practicing place also contains aesthetic and spiritual moments of retreat. In those moments of retreat, something new can emerge.

## A Book as a Space for Spiritual and Artistic Intervention in the Political Sphere

Anne Weber's book opens up precarious, sacred, and heterotopic places that demonstrate that whatever goes by the name of "democracy" is inherently fragile, discontinuous, and risky. If the aspirations of a democratic society as inclusive and performative are to be taken seriously (realizing that they might never have been taken seriously), its micro-political practicing of place cannot be dissociated from "global issues," such as the fair distribution of resources, the universal validity of human rights, as well as cultivating practices of remembrance of crimes committed in the name of the State. In doing so, it requires a discursive openness that incorporates emotions, both in relation to spirituality and aesthetics, as important vectors of the political. Such a mindfulness is rooted in small steps on site, in an embodied perception of what is usually ignored in the panoptic surveillance culture (Foucault, 1977). Hartmut Rosa (2023) describes this kind of openness in his book *Demokratie braucht Religion* (Democracy Needs Religion), stating that "democracy" (whatever that means) does not work in the mode of aggression, but needs a "listening heart." He refers to a passage in the Bible where King Solomon asks God: "Give your servant a listening heart, so that he may know how to govern your people and distinguish good from evil!" (1 Kings 3:9).<sup>11</sup> By a listening heart, Rosa means the ability to be called upon, which he tries to summarize with the concept of resonance. The listening heart involves a different concept of space. Sacred spaces can be spaces in which "a listening heart can be practiced and perhaps also experienced" (Rosa, 2023, pp. 55–56). They must be spaces in which there is nothing that can be "made available," "brought under control or dominated." "The aggression mode finds no target there at all" (Rosa, 2023, p. 68). Since spaces are created performatively, it is not only the place itself, but also the mode of existence of the person that opens up the place to the space. This attitude can mediate religious thinking, because religious thinking is based on "the idea and

realization of resonant relationships” (Rosa, 2023, p. 68). In the attitude of prayer—with which Anne Weber’s book ends—“a tangible, physically visible axis of resonance” is formed (Rosa, 2023, p. 73), opening up the relationship to the encompassing Other.<sup>12</sup>

Weber’s book can also be understood as an artistic intervention, as it is situated in public space, on the street, in everyday life and in the physical space of the city. It redefines this space to highlight social disintegration and reorganize standardization (Steidinger & Berg, 2016). “The idea of a free, equal and inclusive social order [. . .] is not a feel-good concept, but the confrontation with contradictions and conflicts and the constant renegotiation of democratic values” (Smolics & Zobl, 2019, p. 163).<sup>13</sup> The dialogical negotiation processes—in Weber’s case in the conversations between Anne and Thierry and among the visitors to the café—“can be understood as places of the political” according to Chantal Mouffe, “where dominant narratives and their inherent relations of violence are revealed and invisible knowledge becomes visible: Artistic interventions resist power-functional discourses and open up new spaces through their emancipatory action” (Smolics & Zobl, 2019, p. 164).

The fact that literature—even in the age of digital media—can support democracies with non-violent spaces of remembrance was recently made clear by Han Kang’s novel *Human Acts* (2024), which commemorates the Gwangju uprising and massacre. During the attempted coup in South Korea in December 2024, one of the demonstrators, who campaigned for the preservation of democracy, held up this book wrapped in flashing Christmas lanterns (Weidemann, 2024).

## Conclusion: Practicing Place Against a Politics of Fear

By deliberately blurring the boundaries between the political, the spiritual and the aesthetic, *Bannmeilen* itself can be read as a kind of action research as practicing place. However, unlike the social scientific methodological usage of the term, which emphasizes a cyclical reflective engagement between researchers and practitioners (cf. McNiff, 2005), we advocate for a more radical approach.

The first difference is that action research as practicing place refuses to separate “the doings” (of practitioners) from the “sayings” (of researchers) as this enables us to engage with the aesthetic and spiritual aspects of spatial encounters. Anne and Thierry walked through the *banlieues* and recorded their walking in writing and on camera. When writing a reportage novel, there is no real distinction between doings and sayings. There is no real distinction between factional and fictional accounts and between mnemonics and desire. Walking-accounting is cyclical, but not in any formalized sense.

The second difference is that walking-encountering as action-research is not merely an engagement with a mobile gaze that is then shared with “practitioners.” Anne and Thierry did not simply observe, they engaged, with others, with each other and with themselves. Action research is embodied and therefore emplaced. It thereby undermines the subject-object distinctions, which still seem to plague most social scientific methodological conceptions. When Kurt Lewin (1946) wrote about action research as proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action, he was still assuming that a strict separation between the subjective and the objective were possible. De Certeau, however, demonstrates that walking is a method of action research, the transformative capacity of which remains much more implicit, as it is inaugurated by encounters that do not allow for a separation between subjective and objective modalities of the political.

The third difference is that action research as practicing place focuses on events, that is, actual occasions, which do not simply become transformative out of a desire for social engineering, be it of management, planning, or even activism, as the ends do not justify the means. By supplementing the micro-political spaces of encounters with aesthetic and spiritual interventions, which

are indeed always embodied and emplaced, however, action research can dialectically engage with the universality of the homo sacer, through which the violence of the sovereign state is uncovered, destituted and opened up for the hidden potential of a humane living. Even if the fragmentation of post-migrant society may hide the universality of the homo sacer, in the encounters—especially that take place on the margins—we may still sense our own alienation as a stranger-within-ourselves.


In weaving together snippets of accounts, stories, resonances, images, litter as well as sacred objects, *Bannmeilen* is also a form of micro-democratic politics (Gilliam, 2017; Schippers, 2012) and therefore an exemplary form of action research as practicing place. The fact that it does not locate itself in a single discipline and is not dictated by a single protocol or research design, obliterates the stifling scientism of detached objectivity and analytical purity also known as the “Scientific Method.”

However, at the same time, it is also an intervention into the very idea of research being used to “solve problems.” This is the final differentiation from traditional action research. The micro-political aspect of revitalizing a democracy that was promised but never realized cannot be restricted to a single location. That would be a complete denial of the complexity (heterotopia) of that which practicing place has allowed us to engage with. That is, we cannot reduce action research to a form of social engineering if we are to remain faithful to the spirit of democratization as that which had been promised but was never realized. It is this often overlooked aspect of the social sciences, its artificial separation from practices of spirituality and aesthetics that has made it so susceptible to instrumentalization, which often results in rendering itself obsolete.

In a world governed by the politics of fear, which assumes that we lack the courage to take risks, action research may provide an alternative to the institutionalized alienation that feeds off anxiety and neurosis. Instead of engineering the micro-democratic spaces of the political, *Bannmeilen* shows us the opposite: we need to open up to unexpected encounters, and thus to take the *risk* of being irrelevant, and to retain the hope, that in the unexpected new possibilities become available to those who wish to leave the world a better place than how it was found.

### ORCID iDs

Isabelle Stauffer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2354-8744>

Joost van Loon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7837-1405>

### Ethical Considerations

This article does not contain any studies with human or animal participants.

### Consent to Participate

This article does not contain any information about individuals that requires consent.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Data Availability Statement

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

## Notes

1. Agamben (2017, p. 1268) explains this in particular in the epilogue to the complete works of *Homo Sacer*: “If our hypothesis on the structure of the archè is correct, if the fundamental ontological problem today is not work but inoperativity, and if this latter can nevertheless be attested only with respect to a work, then access to a different figure of politics cannot take the form of a ‘constituent power’ but rather that of something that we can provisionally call ‘destituent potential’. And if to constituent power there correspond revolutions, revolts, and new constitutions, namely, a violence that puts in place and constitutes a new law, for destituent potential it is necessary to think entirely different strategies, whose definition is the task of the coming politics.” The destituent potential is not a power relationship, but a kind of “inoperativity” and interruption of it, which has the “capacity to deactivate something and render it inoperative—a power, a function, a human operation—without simply destroying it but by liberating the potentials that have remained inactive in it in order to allow a different use of them” (Agamben, 2017, p. 1274).
2. Anne Weber won the prestigious German Book Prize in 2020 for her epic poem, *Annette, ein Heldinnenepos*, about a resistance fighter and supporter of the Algerian liberation movement. In addition to the epic about Anne Beaumanoir, Weber is also known for books in which religion and spirituality play a central role, such as *Im Anfang war* (2000) and *Kirio* (2017).
3. In 1952, Guy Debord painted *ne travaillez jamais*—never work—on a wall in Paris (Stahlhut et al., 2007, p. 24).
4. Weber’s text seems to be part of a trend. The hero of Teju Cole’s novel *Open City* (2011) is a young intellectual with African roots strolling through New York City. Author, photographer, TV presenter, and journalist John Pitts has already explored Europe from the streets in his book *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* (2019). During his 5-month trip, he also visited the *banlieues* of Paris. And in Kate Zambreno’s autofictional novel *Drifts* (2020), the female protagonist wanders through Brooklyn.
5. Weber refers to Fanon (1986, p. 2) here, without giving the exact reference. In *Black Skins, White Masks*, the first reference to “zones of non-being” appears in the introduction.
6. Weber refers to Hannah Arendt. The reference comes from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 2017, p. 296).
7. The passage “the transient sacralities of a desacralizing society” of Nora’s text is missing in the English translation.
8. Latour and Hermant (2006) did not consider mosques as part of the hidden city of Paris; they had no interest in the role of religion in the operations of a functional city.
9. The usage of the term “swarm” to designate a group of children highlights a specific kind of fear that is related to a multitude of small entities, each too weak on its own to pose a real threat, but as a collective embodies the irrational force of a mass that cannot be negotiated with.
10. Ivan Illich in *The Rivers North of the Future* emphasizes the radical nature of this narrative, which cannot be depicted in ethical rules, but is based on a relationship that overcomes social barriers and enmity. “Perhaps the only way we could recapture it today would be to imagine the Samaritan as a Palestinian ministering to a wounded Jew. He is someone who not only goes outside his ethnic preference for taking care of his own kind, but who commits a kind of treason by caring for his enemy. In so doing, he exercises a freedom of choice, whose radical novelty has often been overlooked” (Illich & Cayley, 2005, 50f.).
11. The “listening heart” is in the German translation of the Bible. In the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Coogan Michael, 2018) there is no “listening heart,” but “an understanding mind” (1 Kings 3:9).
12. Frantz Fanon (1986, p. 232) also concludes his *Black Skin, White Masks* with a final prayer “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!”
13. We do not claim to know what these “democratic values” are. We do not even claim to know what they might be for Anne Weber. For the purposes of this article, they merely serve as an empty signifier. Their emptiness is a reflection of the empty promises that have been made under the label of “democracy.”

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### Author Biographies

**Isabelle Stauffer** is professor of modern German literature at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. Some of her main research interests are postcolonial and postmigrant literature, performativity and mediality.

**Martin Kirschner** is professor of theology in transformational processes at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. Some of his main research interests are performativity, political theology and spirituality.

**Joost van Loon** is professor of General Sociology and Sociological Theory at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. Some of his main research interests are place, space and politics.