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# What is in a Word? / À l'intérieur de mots:

*A Portrait of Community Creative Writing Groups*

“What is in a Word / À l'intérieur des mots” is a project that started in February 2013, initiated by L'Anneau Poétique, in collaboration with the Community University Research Exchange (CURE) at QPIRG Concordia. The aim of the project was to gather information on community-based creative writing groups in Montreal for research purposes, and to make it easier for the different groups in the city to communicate with each other, organize collaborative events, share knowledge, and build solidarity. L'Anneau Poétique holds monthly poetry sessions, open mics, and teams up with activist groups and grassroots writing groups from across Canada to organize events in its home base of Côte des Neiges as well as in other parts of Montreal.

For this project, I gathered information on the following groups: Jeunesse 2000, Café Graffiti, the Saint James Drop-in Centre, Forward House, Les Impatients, Culture X, L'Injecteur and BUMP. This article aims to provide an overview of the

research done as of July 2013, as well as underlying the major ideas I gathered through this project.

*Overview: A plurality of voices and purposes*

The different creative writing groups I contacted throughout the project encompass a lot of different voices from varied communities and experiences. These include people with mental illnesses and disorders, people who consume street drugs (UDI- Utilisateurs de Drogues par Injection et Inhalation), disaffected youth from different neighbourhoods, homeless people, young pregnant women and many others whose voices are rarely heard. The aims of these creative writing activities are also diverse as they range from fostering creative expression to providing therapeutic outlet to fighting for social integration and action. Groups also produce publications that sometimes have a strong social and political commitment.

The groups' sizes range from 2-3 to 10-12 participants. The groups that are part of the project are all attached to community organizations that fund these writing activities, and in turn, get their funding from the Quebec Government, the City of Montreal, banks, or from other donors. Café Graffiti, however, is a self-funding organization that funds

its project by selling *Reflets de Société*, a magazine on current social issues.

*Spaces of free expression*

The groups offer safe and inclusive environments to their members and in doing so, they create spaces of free expression where creativity can be fostered in an independent and organic way. The studio activities carried out by these organizations seek to provide equipment and recording material for their members. For example, *Jeunesse 2000*, a drop-in centre in NDG for youth aged 12 to 17 allows members to sing, slam, rap, and write poetry. The Studio has been running since 2005, and is participatory in nature. It seeks to foster the youths' creative selves but is also dedicated to social action and community building. Similarly, *West Haven* in NDG and *Youth in Motion* in Little Burgundy also offer studio activities and spaces of expression for the youth of these neighbourhoods. On the eastern side of Montreal, *Café Graffiti* in Hochelaga is a space of creative expression for youth as well as young adults for members can remain part of the collective until they believe they are autonomous and independent to leave. The group describes itself as a "milieu de vie" where members can attend a variety of workshops including creative writing and graffiti.

In other cases, spaces can take the form of a blank page left for anyone to fill in. After being hit by a fire in 2012 and being forced to relocate, the Saint-James Drop-in Centre – a downtown Montreal group dedicated to offering a safe space to marginalized people suffering from homelessness, addiction or mental illness – left 5 journals to be filled in by its members to express themselves throughout the transition and relocation. What came out of this project was *Idéambule*, a journal launched by the Centre in May 2013 and that contains drawings, written pieces and poetry that reflect the lived experiences of a community at the margins of society.

*Community building and social integration through culture*

Another important aspect I found in all the groups is their emphasis on using creative cultural tools and creative writing for social integration, through fostering the members' social skills and confidence. Forward House, a community-based mental health service organization located in NDG, holds creative writing workshops that are also dedicated to the preparation of their bi-annual publication, the *BUOY* journal. The workshops aim to allow members of Forward House to develop better social and interpersonal relationship skills through the writing

and sharing of their texts. Similarly, *Café Graffiti* offers participatory creative writing workshops that have an emphasis on social integration. Raymond Viger, its founder, describes the workshop as leading to personal progression towards autonomy and reintegration into society while at the same time fostering a sense of belonging in its members.

Culture X, located in Montreal-Nord, and as part of a greater program of "intégration socio-professionnelle," also seeks to create solidarity and social inclusion. Culture X is a community organization functioning under the Commission Scolaire de la Pointe de L'Île, dedicated to social and professional integration through the arts, including writing workshops for young people who have dropped out of school. Their activities, although primarily targeting youth, are open to everyone. The writing workshop, which occurs on a weekly basis for seven months, focuses on songwriting and performance. Thus, the workshop allows the participants to build a solid experience in writing and performing, while at the same time fostering solidarity between the participants inside the group. On a larger scale it seeks to demystify the prejudices about Montréal-Nord by encouraging everyone in other parts of the city to attend.

*Community building and beyond: networks of solidarity & positive effects on neighbourhoods*

An important feature of some of the groups studied here is their outreach efforts to their local neighbourhoods and beyond, to other parts of Montreal and even Quebec, and the rest of Canada. Although writing is an individual experience, a number of the groups help foster a sense of belonging to a broader community by building solidarity networks, while positively affecting their neighbourhoods at the local level. Journals published by some groups are distributed to several different community organizations, thus reaching a broader readership and creating links between different communities.

For example, Forward House's BUOY journal is distributed to many other community organizations such as UP House, L'Abri en Ville, and Ami Québec – organizations also dedicated to people with mental illness – as well as to public libraries and coffee shops in NDG and other neighbourhoods. Les Impatients, a community organization in Ville-Marie, dedicated to people with mental illnesses, publishes an anthology of love letters written by their members and other voluntary participants. The anthology, Milles Mots d'Amour, is sold in many bookstores all around Québec. LAQPSUD (L'Association Québécoise pour

la Promotion de la Santé des Personnes Utilisatrices de Drogues), a community organization dedicated to and run by people consuming street drugs also produces a publication, L'Injecteur, that aims to promote health and create better living conditions. It is distributed at the local, regional, provincial and national levels, but also in several countries in Europe. Therefore, the distribution of these journals originating at the local level helps build much broader networks of solidarity beyond their specific locations.

Creative writing workshops can also have a positive impact on their neighbourhoods at a very local level. For example, BUMP, the Burgundy Urban Mediation Project in Little Burgundy, hosted regular creative writing workshops from 2009 to 2012 for the youth in Little Burgundy, with the specific goal of helping to reduce violence in the neighbourhood through creative expression. It was also a way to help the participants to do better in school with the ultimate goal of creating a better social environment for people in Little Burgundy by using writing and education.

*Fighting prejudice and empowering communities*

Finally, the last important aspect of those creative writing groups and their

publications is their role in empowering marginalized communities that often face prejudices. This is accomplished by presenting knowledge and stories via a creative writing process which originates from the communities themselves and allows them to fight prejudices through self-representation. Forward House's journal and writing workshops, along with its social integration and community building purpose, also has social action as a goal. Indeed, it aims to empower the community of mentally ill people, and seeks to defeat the stigma put forth by society regarding mental illness. Similarly, Les Impatient's anthology seeks to demystify mental illness for the public.

L'Injecteur, the AQPSUD publication, is another good example of empowerment and social action through writing. Only those who are drug users and who are part of this community, called the Infomans, write in this journal. The same can be said about its twin organization, l'ADDICQ (Association pour la Défense des Droits et l'Inclusion des personnes qui Consomment de la drogue au Québec), where only people that are themselves drug users are allowed to have a say and vote in the functioning of the organization. Thus, the knowledge and stories originate from them. By doing this, they seek to get rid of paternalist and moralizing attitudes, but

also to contribute to the empowerment of this community of drug users that is comprised of a variety of people who suffer greatly from marginalization, as sharing personal stories will genuinely speak to other people in the same situation and create links.

### *Conclusion*

The research project shows that the aim of community-based writing groups can go beyond their initial creative purpose. By creating inclusive environments, they encourage people to express themselves freely and communicate. Thus, each group in their own way contributes to the social integration of their members and to building a local, empowered community. In addition, it also shows that everyone can be a writer and a poet, and thus challenges the traditional views of poetry and creative literature as an elite art.

The detailed information gathered throughout the project will be shared on the Anneau Poétique website at <http://anneaupoetique.wordpress.com/>