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Workshops as Weapons of Mass Transmission

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Panel: Teaching Writing

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WORKSHOPS AS WEAPONS OF MASS TRANSMISSION

“Once upon a time is what the fence dividing up a mountain range announces, in lines at once irregular and even”
- *Brilliant Water*, Christopher Merrill

In the French suburbs, violence, unemployment, and the number of single-parent families are higher than everywhere else¹. Of course I'm not speaking about the wealthy suburbs like Neuilly, the city of French president Sarkozy, but about the so-called “banlieues”, the equivalent of the American “inner cities”, except that they are located at the peripheries of major cities. Many people, including in France, discovered this social reality during the riots of November 2005, which set ablaze hundreds of under-privileged neighborhoods². That's the kind of place I live in now and where I teach the majority of my writing workshops.

Since my first book was published, in 2006, I have directed writing workshops in a dozen or so elementary schools and junior high schools. On the outskirts of big cities, people are mainly of immigrant descent and Caucasians often represent a minority. Some of my classes are exclusively made up of people coming from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. My writing workshops are as much – if not more – related to social action than strictly to literary culture. Instead of trying to apply elaborate and academic criteria, I try to establish culture as a first bridge, a vector of socialization. I tend to adapt my teaching to my public who, in the words of linguist Alain Bentolila, “live with 400 words.”³ He further notes that “between 12 and 15% of today's youth use exclusively the language of the “técis” the argotic word for cités, or suburbs,” while an average 18 year-old French teenager speaks with 1500 words⁴. During the workshops, I let the 10 to 18 year-olds express their creativity in “free styles.” In a given situation, I come up with a role-play, with a setting that

¹ Unemployment rate in certain districts: 40%, a figure recently quoted on TV by Brice Hortefeux, Minister of Interior Department . In 1999, single-parent families represented 15% of the household while the French average is 8% (Source : Observatoire National des Zones Urbaines Sensibles).

² As the nearly 20 different ministers in charge of urban policy since 1990 illustrate, France has experienced what could be called a 40-year paralysis in the domain of urban policy. And to this day, one can't stress enough the divide between what was supposedly going to be a Marshall plan for the suburbs as promised by Sarkozy during his presidential campaign and the reality of the modest “Hope for the Suburbs” plan that was carried out.

³ “Le Monde ” - 03.09.2005 - “Vivre avec 400 words”, Frederic Potet.

⁴ Source : Luc Fayard, teacher at the University of Dauphine.

includes as many characters as there are students. As opposed to a more traditional teacher, I insist on the fact that creation is a noisy process, and ideas must come out as they go through the children's minds. The magic words: no censorship. However, creativity does not mean anarchy; each kid must come up with his or her own psychology for the character, while considering that he or she is a part of a whole. They then conduct a dialogue in search of balance and coherence. In short, they recreate the different steps that occur in the mind of an author. Finally, several readings are necessary to polish the text, to get rid of repetitions, and to erase inconsistencies. This can be tiresome and painful, but a reading by several voices validates the final work. The result is often brilliant. It is also a true testimony of the creativity and the nonconformist views that make up the real— but unexploited - talent of these young people in the suburbs.

I also teach 18 to 23 year-olds who dropped out of school at around 14. They are all immigrant descendants born in France, who speak French mixed with the language of the “técis”. They are unskilled workers, but they fund an association for the promotion of culture in the suburbs. With them, I proceed in a different manner. For example, I organized a meeting with the award-winning Gilbert Sinoué, author of historical novels. At the beginning of the adventure, it seemed impossible to these teenagers that a famous writer would come to visit them in the projects. I had to fight the idea that literature is a field from which they were and would necessarily remain excluded. To do so, I explained that if I, Mabrouck Rachedi, from the suburb could be invited everywhere in France, then writers from the rest of France could also come to the suburbs. Though this may seem like common sense, it was not at all obvious to them. If anything, this shows one of the invisible fences inhibiting any action in France's popular districts. Sinoué happily agreed to take part in a debate. More than fifty people participated in the meeting, which was led by French immigrant teenagers. We were far from rap concerts or soccer games. Furthermore, the experience changed the lives of some of these guys, one of whom is writing his own novel, and who has even developed a mentor-student relationship with Sinoué.

I also work with schools away from the suburbs to counter clichés of violence. When I ask people who live in rural or wealthy areas what they think about the suburbs, they immediately repeat what they see on TV. It often is a shocker for them to learn that I still live in a suburb, though I don't speak with the typical accent from the 'hood' and I'm rather a calm person. Plus, I even have a pretty good sense of humor at times, imagine that! I also taught them that the so-called “urban literature” movement which I am often associated with does not merely consist in writing as one speaks, that it to say by artificially using curse words or “yo” everywhere. Instead, it is a true, painful,

and difficult endeavor which requires complex techniques, a sense of rhythm, poetry and inventiveness. It is not about writing a compilation of expressions heard on TV onto a white page. In this case, my goal is to deconstruct the stereotypes about urban literature or what's closely related to the stereotypes of the suburbs.

In conclusion, I think, like Elizabeth Auclair⁵, a teacher at the University of Cergy Pontoise that cultural actions are “a way to rebuild individual and collective identities, but also to give credit to the identities of the suburbs, too often strongly stigmatized. Art can also be a tool for socialization, even for social and professional integration”. This is the reason I use my pen as a weapon of mass expression and my little knowledge as a weapon of mass transmission.

⁵ From Elizabeth Auclair's "Offres et demandes culturelles, ou la spécificité du développement culturel en banlieue" ("Cultural supply and demand, or the specificity of cultural development in suburbs") in "Situations de banlieues. Enseignement, langues, cultures" ("Suburban Situations. Teaching, Languages, Cultures") directed by Marie-Madeleine Bertucci et Violaine Houdart-Merot, collection Éducation, politiques, sociétés, INRP, 2005.
