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The Ghetto Novels of Guillaume Dustan

Daniel Hendrickson and Marc Siegel

In June 1997, a series of "salons littéraires européens de l'homosexualité" was held in Paris in conjunction with the celebration of Europride, a pan-European gay and lesbian pride festival which takes place in a different city each year. These salons provided the welcome occasion to reflect on the current state of French and other European literatures in relation to homosexuality. More often than not, however, the salons became the site for the public display of a certain discomfort about the subject at hand, especially as it relates to group identity.¹ The salon entitled "Du fantasme en écriture" is a telling example. In contrast to the majority of the salons, which were held in various general bookshops, embassies, and national cultural centers, this event was held in what could easily be called "gay community space," that is, at *Les Mots à la Bouche*, the gay and lesbian bookstore in Paris. The speakers included a handful of more or less established writers, all of whom had written on explicitly gay themes, and Guillaume Dustan, whose first novel had only recently been published. In their opening statements, panelist after panelist exhibited a clear uneasiness with any hint of the communal and in particular with any identification as a gay writer. The moderator then turned to Dustan, who opened his statements in striking contrast to the others, stating unequivocally, "Moi je suis très ghetto."

In the following pages, we would like to consider the implications of Dustan's pithy remark. What does it mean to call oneself "très ghetto?" More specifically, how is this ghetto sensibility manifested in literature? In order to provide a framework for answering these questions, we will examine Dustan's novels in relation to the theory of Guy Hocquenghem. The work of both writers attests to the existence of a sexual ghetto, one not defined by homosexual identity, but constituted through sexual prac-

tices. While our interest here is to introduce readers to the remarkable work of Guillaume Dustan, we also want to argue that Dustan's ghetto novels represent a significant intervention in French debates about sexual minorities.

By the time of the Europride salons, Dustan's first novel, *Dans ma chambre*,² had already caused something of a sensation in French gay literary circles, both for its explicit ghetto perspective and for its frank discussion of drug use and sexuality in relation to living with HIV. Undoubtedly, some of the book's allure also lay in the fact that its author had remained anonymous until his appearance at a handful of these literary salons. Though his anonymity is no longer strict (besides his personal appearances, photographs of him have appeared in the gay press), he still maintains the use of his pseudonym. In late 1997, his second novel, *Je sors ce soir*, was released.³ Both of the novels are written in a spare, matter-of-fact style using first-person narrative, not unlike the novels of Hervé Guibert and other post-*nouveau roman* writers. Aside from stylistic similarities, Dustan and Guibert share an unsentimental attention to the daily experience of living with HIV and an immodesty in depicting the effects of disease on the body and on bodily functions.⁴ Dustan's forthright chronicling of sexual adventures, on the other hand, more readily recalls Renaud Camus's pre-AIDS novel, *Tricks*.

Dans ma chambre recounts the (mostly) sexual adventures of Guillaume, an HIV positive gay man living in Paris. The novel is solely concerned with those aspects of Guillaume's life that relate to the gay ghetto. Guillaume's occasional references to work or family, for instance, only underscore their relative lack of centrality in his life: "On ne sait jamais ce que les gens font. On s'en fout" (JS 36). Dustan instead gives us an almost obsessively detailed account of ghetto life: evenings spent in bars, discos, and sex clubs; exhaustive descriptions of what people are wearing, hairstyles, musculature, cock size, presence or absence of body hair; and, especially, lengthy accounts of sexual encounters, from "branché sm" to "baise classique," including cataloguing sex toys and safe sex paraphernalia. The novel begins with the demise of one relationship, then follows another from its inception to its end. The narrative ends with Guillaume deciding to take a

job (we still do not know what sort) outside the country (we do not know where) and saying good-bye to his friends in Paris.

Dustan's second novel, *Je sors ce soir*, recounts a single night out at a popular gay dance club, the *gtd* (gay tea dance) after Guillaume has returned to Paris. Here again, the novel is marked by exhaustive detailing, of trips to the toilet (several times), of decisions about what to drink, of the clothes and appearance of other club patrons, or of Guillaume's bodily sensations when the ecstasy he takes kicks in. Once again, the perspective is decidedly, and at times romantically, ghetto, as indicated by Guillaume's observations shortly after arriving at the club.

Je mate en me disant que c'est cool d'être là à nouveau, parmi mes frères du ghetto. Que des pédés. Que des mecs que je peux regarder sans aucun risque de me faire casser la gueule. Même si c'est dans les yeux. Que des mecs à qui ça fait a priori plaisir que je puisse avoir envie d'eux. Un endroit où je n'ai plus à être sur la défensive. Un endroit où je ne suis plus un animal qui attend qu'on l'attaque. Le paradis. (JS 18)

The ghetto space of the gay bar serves here both as a space for socializing and cruising, but also for offering comfort and physical safety.

Dustan's valorization of the ghetto is striking in the immediate context of French debates about "communautarisme ou républicanisme," as it was put in a special section of the gay news magazine *Ex Aequo*.⁵ These debates about the position of minorities within the French Republic were first raised, according to Eric Lamien, at the time of the anti-racist movements of the early 1980s (38). However, with the greater visibility of gays in the French media (namely through coverage of Parisian gay pride events in the mid '90s) and, particularly, with the publication of Frédéric Martel's neoconservative history of homosexual liberation in France, *Le rose et le noir*, the question took on specific meaning for sexual minorities. In the special section in *Ex Aequo*, several prominent writers derided "communautarisme" in favor of a universalist republicanism. Larys Frogier, in an essay on AIDS activism in France, has pointed out the deeply conservative nature of these "universalist ideologies of assimilation and tolerance," calling them "mythologized values" which are

touted "even as France is mired in acute racism, flagrant economic injustice, sexual discrimination, and the carnage of AIDS" (347). In their attempt to deny the validity of specific minority concerns within France, supporters of republican universalism often set up the debate in explicitly nationalist terms: French republicanism vs. American-style identity politics. As Lamien summarizes the question:

Pour parvenir à une réelle égalité des droits, les homosexuels doivent-ils s'inscrire dans un processus d'égalité universaliste à la Française, au risque de nier leur identité, ou doivent-ils construire des structures et des représentations communautaires qui leur soient propres, sur un modèle américain, au risque de se couper du reste de la société? (40, emphasis added)

The ghetto as figured in Dustan's novels, however, does not necessarily correspond to or even suggest "un modèle américain." In fact, Dustan's elaboration of the ghetto, as controversial as it may be, is neither without support nor without precedent in France. First, the ghetto perspective of his books seems to generate no controversy whatsoever for either the characters in the novels or for many of their readers. Moreover, the work of Guy Hocquenghem attests to the presence of a highly developed ghetto theory in France at least twenty years earlier. Hocquenghem begins his introduction to *Le Gay Voyage: Guide homosexuel des grandes métropoles* with the following lines:

Je ne connais pas de villes, je ne connais que des ghettos. Des ghettos qui se succèdent, à peine interrompus de gares ou d'aéroports. Cité de la nuit, disait le grand écrivain John Rechy: le Lungotevere s'achève à West Street, le Tibre se jette dans Hudson River, la porte du fond de ce sauna d'Amsterdam s'ouvre sur la salle obscure d'un cinéma de Pigalle. Les Tuileries et Central Park ont le même lion de bronze, et les mêmes ombres tournoient au petit matin dans les allées (9).

Hocquenghem's "ghettos qui se succèdent" comprise an inventory of spaces typically associated with gay male subcultures—bars, saunas, cinemas, and parks. What links these spaces, however, is not necessarily the identity, but rather the practices, of the people who frequent them. Hocquenghem's ghetto is thus

not merely a collection of spaces, but a relationship between bodies and spaces. As Cindy Patton notes in *Fatal Advice: How Safe-Sex Education Went Wrong*, "space and identity converge in complex ways: a body names a place, a body takes names to a place, a body's presence transforms space—new names and a new sense of place arise" (143).

For Hocquenghem, the ghetto also serves as a site where one can hone some very necessary skills for navigating vastly different urban landscapes—that is, where one can learn and perfect the art of cruising: "Un plan de ville, c'est un territoire de chasse. Et draguer, une manière de le lire" (9). The ghetto then is not restricted to a particular part of town, but is "épandu partout." It exceeds the limits of particular spaces because it is a perspective, or a minoritarian sensibility. "En chaque ville, il est une voie d'accès propre aux minoritaires, une sensibilité qui leur est particulière, dans la manière de ressentir ce qui fait le climat d'une cité. Mais cette sensibilité ne se limite pas au 'ghetto', elle donne forme et sens à toute la ville" (10-11). This minoritarian sensibility is cultivated through an emphasis on, as Hocquenghem notes, minor or otherwise trivialized practices, like momentary sexual encounters, and drug and alcohol use.

Dustan's ghetto is similarly constructed around the practices of sex, drugs, and alcohol: "Je vis dans un monde merveilleux où tout le monde a couché avec tout le monde" (DMC 70). Like Hocquenghem, Dustan does not conceive of a ghetto as merely an inventory of spaces. Rather, it is a sexually charged relationship between bodies and spaces, a non-determining relationship that cannot necessarily be transposed from one space to another, from one moment to the next.

Dans ce monde, chacun a baisé avec au moins cinq cents mecs, en bonne partie les même d'ailleurs. Mais les réseaux ne se superposent pas exactement. Les mecs sont plutôt bars. Plutôt boîtes. Plutôt bar-boîtes. Plutôt sauna. Plutôt rézo. Plutôt minitel. Plutôt bruns. Plutôt blonds. Plutôt musclés. Plutôt hard. Plutôt baise classique. On a le choix. Beaucoup de choix. (DMC 70)

The expansiveness of this network of bodies and spaces guarantees the existence of an erotic potentiality but does not dictate where and when it will become embodied.

On the other hand, the expansiveness of the ghetto is not unlimited. As Guillaume reminds us, "il n'y a pas de ghettos partout. Il y a Londres, Amsterdam, Berlin, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sydney. L'été, il y a Ibiza, Sitges, Fire Island, Mykonos, Majorque" (DMC 75). Even within Paris, the "voie d'accès" to the city is not without its boundaries. For instance, when Guillaume is leaving a friend whom he has met on the street, they kiss each other on the lips. This kiss, as Dustan does not fail to point out, takes place "juste devant les flics" (DMC 47). Though his ghetto behavior here is marked as defiant in relation to "les flics," it is nonetheless positioned in relation to them. Later, he runs into another friend at a swimming pool, where the friend tells him that he has recently found out that he has seroconverted. Dustan writes, "je ne pouvais pas le prendre dans mes bras parce qu'on était dans un endroit public" (DMC 49). It is not without some irony that this incident takes place at the pool at *les Halles*, which is widely known as a cruising spot for men who want to have sex with other men. The use of this public space as a cruising spot mandates a certain disavowal which both affords a degree of safety, but which also requires the maintenance of the space as at least nominally outside the ghetto. Guillaume's hesitation to comfort his friend therefore suggests limits to the transformative potential of the ghetto. The two incidents—kissing one friend and refraining from embracing another—reflect an awareness of these limits, an awareness that though the bodily contact between two men signifies, how and what this means depends on where and when the bodies come into contact.

In the following pages, we will discuss how a particular (and we would say particularly French) notion of the ghetto is elaborated through Dustan's use of language, his fastidious attention to the body, and his provocative descriptions of sexual practices.

The Ghetto Spoken

The specificity of Dustan's ghetto in the novels is, first and foremost, determined by language. The novels are written in ghetto language, or what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called "minor language."⁶ For Deleuze and Guattari, a minor language is not a standard language spoken by a small number of speakers, but rather a destabilizing use of a major language marked by the immediate connection to the political and the importance of collective value. It is constituted through variation on the major language and a deliberate impoverishment or sobriety of this language. Such variation may include, but is not simply equivalent to the use of intimate language, slang, or bilingualism. Each of these linguistic features is prominent in Dustan's novels.

From the very first pages of both of the books, the language is casual and informal. Quotation marks and other aspects of standard French punctuation are never used to convey dialogue, which blurs the boundary between speech and writing and occasionally even makes it difficult to ascertain who is speaking. The narrator immediately uses the tone of familiar conversation and treats the reader as an insider, without so much as a brief introduction. Intimate and not always flattering details about the personal life of the narrator are divulged without explanation or apology. In the opening paragraph of *Dans ma chambre*, Guillaume recounts the logistical problems of sharing an apartment with his former boyfriend:

J'ai laissé la chambre à Quentin. Je me suis installé dans la petite pièce au fond de l'appart pour ne pas les entendre baiser. Au bout de quelques jours, une semaine peut-être, j'ai fini par trouver ça trop glauque. J'ai exigé de récupérer la chambre. Bien entendu Quentin a immédiatement décidé de s'installer dans le salon avec Nico, ce qui faisait que j'étais obligé de taper contre le mur pour les faire parler moins fort au milieu de la nuit quand j'allais bosser le lendemain. Comme ça je pouvais en prime entendre Quentin dire qu'il allait venir me casser la gueule et Nico lui répondre Chéri calme-toi (DMC 11).

The reader is implicated in the intimate space of friends—that is, the intimate space of urban ghetto-oriented gay male friends. In-

deed, throughout the two books the reader is not addressed as an interested outsider, but rather as a knowing member of the group, sharing similar points of reference—bars, clothes, cruising habits, and HIV.⁷

The consistency of this casual style of language is underscored in each of the books by an incident in which, suddenly, the dialogue is rendered in standard, polite spoken French. In *Dans ma chambre*, the narrator has to call the fire department for help with a friend who has passed out in his apartment after overdosing on drugs. The language of the initial phone conversation with the fireman (“Allo bonsoir monsieur” [DMC 115]) and the encounter between the firemen and the overdosed friend (“Allez monsieur, il faut vous lever maintenant” [DMC 115]) is polite and impersonal, in stark contrast to the intimate language of the remainder of the book. The incident of standard French in *Je sors ce soir* underscores the specificity of the circle of friends even more strongly. It occurs when the narrator leaves the club to get something to eat at a nearby fast food restaurant. He and the server at the restaurant speak to each other in the cool, polite terms of French service language (“Vingt francs soixante-dix, vous pouvez patienter un moment, s’il vous plaît?” [25]). Guillaume’s conversations with the service people in the club, however, are marked by the immediate use of *tu* and by other signs of informality.

Slang also figures prominently in Dustan’s linguistic ghetto. There are several distinguishable types of slang, ranging from general to extremely specific, in evidence throughout the books: the widely used, popular French slang consisting of more or less standard argot (*boulot*, *connard*); spoken abbreviations (*mat*, *appart*, *exta*, *restau*); elements of urban and particularly youth speech, such as the frequent use of *verlan* (*keubla*, *rebeu*, *meuf*); and finally, a specialized sexual slang for certain acts and sex toys, largely confined to urban gay usage.

The use of English also permeates the books, both in the form of anglicisms in the body of a piece of text in French (“C’est cool” [JS 62]) and of English as English, mostly in intermittent dance song lyrics and dialogue with foreigners (“Where are you from in America?” [DMC 136]). Indeed, all dialogue that takes place in English is left untranslated. This would at first thought

seem to be simple bilingualism, as distinct from the bilingualism "in one's own language" that Deleuze and Guattari describe in relation to Kafka and others (*Thousand Plateaus* 105). On closer examination, however, the neat distinction between English as English and French as French in these books breaks down. The presence of English (or rather Englishes) around the world as a result of global capitalism is widely known. What is perhaps less widely known is the position of English in relation to the global expansion of Anglo-American style gay identity and culture. English is the dominant language for this transnational gay culture, in part because of the wider prevalence of English as the new global language, but also because a huge percentage of gay cultural products (films, books, safe sex pamphlets, porno tapes, even queer theory) are in English. Guillaume, for instance, brings back the latest "compil de house," a collection of English-language gay dance club music, from London (DMC 126). Speaking English, then, in this context, is a way of queering oneself, of putting oneself into play in the global gay ghetto. Indeed, traces of English are in wide use throughout the gay scene in Paris, from the names of bars and restaurants (*Le Coming Out*, *Open Café*, *What's Up Bar*) to the terminology used for sex toys and sexual practices (*chaps*, *plugs*, *sling*, *fisting*). In this sense, one could question whether the English in these two novels is really English (in the British or American sense) or rather a kind of queer French.

Finally, Guillaume has a clear sense of his ghetto language as the kind of subtraction that characterizes what Deleuze and Guattari call the "cramped space" of the minor literature (*Kafka* 17). When the narrator is heading out of the club to get his fast food, he notices a sign which says "Toute sortie est définitive." He approaches the bouncer:

Je me penche vers son oreille et je dis, - Si on sort on ne peut plus rentrer, c'est ça? Mais il cligne de l'oeil et il fait, - Vas-y, avec la tête, et en même temps il ouvre la barrière de sécurité pour me laisser le passage, et je sors en disant, - Merci. Tout ça n'a pas duré plus de cinq secondes. C'est ça que j'aime la nuit: la communication réduite à l'essentiel. (JS 24)

Here Guillaume praises the efficiency and brevity of the shared language of the ghetto, even while he engages in a kind of shorthand with the reader that echoes that very trait ("c'est ça que j'aime la nuit"). For Dustan, as for Guy Hocquenghem, *la nuit* is a kind of queer code word for the entirety of the ghetto. At night, a wink of the eye, a head motion, and a bodily movement that clears a way out can convey all that is necessary for one to navigate ghetto spaces. At night one is a man of few words, particularly if the words are well-chosen and are complemented with appropriate bodily posture, gesture, or movement. At night, "on agit seulement. La parole est action. L'oeil aux aguets. Le geste chargé de sens" (DMC 118). If communication can be reduced to the essential, it is in no small part because in the ghetto, the body also speaks. In fact, it could be argued that in the novels of Guillaume Dustan, the body never stops speaking.

The Ghetto Embodied

Cindy Patton, writing about what she calls sexual vernacular, emphasizes the contextual quality of communication in a sexual ghetto: "The ways of being within sexual cultures are difficult to articulate, their processes of acculturation—their practices—are to some extent unspeakable, unformalizable" (142). For Dustan, since these ways of being cannot be formalized, they must be exhaustively detailed. Indeed, throughout the two books, the care paid to describing what bodies look like and what they do borders on the obsessive.

J'ai les cheveux très courts, mon 501 en cuir noir, des bottes allemandes, un pull camionneur bleu, le col de ma chemise met juste une touche de couleur. J'ai sept ans de gym derrière moi. Un peu de ventre, vraiment peu, ça part en deux semaines si je fais des abdos, le seul truc, c'est les mollets qui sont un peu fins (DMC 30).

For Guillaume and his "frères du ghetto," clothes, haircuts, muscles, jewelry, and piercings serve to convey everything from the most general statements about oneself (whether or not one is a *frère du ghetto* in the first place) to the most specific (what exactly one wants to do or have done sexually), as well as anything in between. Sometimes bodily appearance establishes one as a

part of a well-established subculture (for example, the wearing of leather to signify "branché sm"). At other times, details of appearance speak only for a particular sexual act, and can be changed at will, as for example in the signaling of "passif/actif."

The terms "actif" and "passif," and their American counterparts "top" and "bottom," bear some discussion, due to their multiple implications in gay culture. "Top" and "bottom" are by no means simple, discrete categories, nor is there even any general agreement on exactly what the terms imply. They are used, particularly within SM culture, to refer to general ideas of dominance and submission, often bearing little or no relation to specific sexual activities. The sense in which they are most widely used, however, is solely to indicate the role taken in anal sex. Even this fairly straightforward use, however, begs the question of how strict these roles are, whether or not they apply to individual acts or to general personality traits. Additionally, for many men roles in anal sex have complex associations with issues of masculinity and sexual identity. Dustan, in an interview in the gay magazine *Têtu*, notes, "certains se disent pédés, mais strictement actifs, comme si le fait de ne pas se faire enculer les rendait un peu moins pédés que les autres. L'actif est mis en valeur, alors que le passif est généralement considéré comme une salope" (28). Furthermore, the division between top and bottom is only useful (which is to say, erotically charged) to a certain percentage of gay men. Many gay men conceive of their sexuality and their relation to specific sexual acts entirely outside these categories. Added to the complex set of meanings already at play, the particulars of HIV transmission have generated a whole new set of ramifications which are not easily superimposed on existing assumptions. The wide discrepancy in the level of risk between the active and the passive partner in anal sex has restigmatized the desire to be penetrated, marking it as both unmasculine and unhealthy.

It is in this complicated context that Guillaume deliberates about the signals he's sending at the *gtd* (gay tea dance). At one point in *Je sors ce soir*, after dancing a little while, Guillaume takes off his T-shirt and details the process of deciding what to do with it.

Au lieu de le laisser pendre bêtement derrière, je fourre les dix premiers centimètres, assez pour être sûr de ne pas le perdre, dans le dos entre le slip et le jean, pas tout à fait au milieu, un peu du côté gauche, pour indiquer que je ne suis ni 100% actif – ce serait carrément au gauche – ni 100% passif – ce serait carrément à droite – mais les deux. Donc je me mets au milieu, mais un peu à gauche, parce que si je le mettais pile au milieu, ou au milieu vers la droite, ça voudrait dire que je suis actif-passif mais plutôt passif, donc en réalité total passif. (JS 23)

His lengthy deliberation here, like many other such deliberations in the books, does not so much reflect Guillaume's uncertainty as it does his acute awareness of the complexity of the system of signification.

Clothes and haircuts are the primary markers of bodily appearance throughout *Dans ma chambre*, but in *Je sors ce soir*, the role of muscles and body hair assume greater importance. At the *gtd*, Guillaume has a clear sense of not having the right kind of body. Shortly after arriving at the club, he complains, "je n'ai pas confiance en mon corps" (JS 21). Later, when he's on the dance floor, he has a minor crisis over the state of his own body:

Tout le monde bouge son corps sublime. Et juste à ma droite apparaît un corps encore plus sublime que tous les autres. Le t-shirt monte lentement au-dessus des épaules pour révéler un torse où chaque muscle est, non seulement énorme, mais encore parfaitement défini. La chose se met à bouger. Je remonte, ça va me calmer, en haut c'est plus populaire. (JS 37)

The body here, hardly a human being at all ("la chose"), appears not as an object of attraction in any real sense, but only as a reminder of the inadequacies of Guillaume's own body. Here the muscleman seems to fulfill its stereotype in gay culture as a hypermasculine ideal which is simultaneously attractive and oppressive. But the function of muscles in the urban gay ghetto is not so simple. The muscular body does not only indicate strength and virility, it can also indicate health. In a community that includes many people with AIDS, being too thin can become equated with being ill. Being muscular, then, is one possible—even if irrational—method of stemming off illness, of not wasting away.

The idea of the muscleman's body as oppressively hyper-masculine is called further into question by its relation to the *actif/passif* divide. At one point Guillaume complains to his friend, Jean-Luc, about the prevalence of musclemen at the club. "C'était pas comme ça il y a dix ans, maintenant Paris c'est comme Los Angeles, j'ajoute en exagérant tout de même un peu." Jean-Luc reassures him, "Ouais mais tu sais, la plupart c'est des passifs, alors avec la concurrence ils ont intérêt à être super-bien foutus. Quand t'es actif, tu trouves toujours, c'est pas pareil" (JS 47). This line of reasoning echoes both the general stereotype that the majority of gay men are "passifs," and also the specific incident earlier when Guillaume decided to hang his T-shirt slightly to the left (again, left signifying active). "Comme je ne suis pas assez bodybuildé je la joue actif en pensant que j'aurai plus de chances" (JS 23).

The consistent though ambiguous role played by body hair in *Je sors ce soir* further attests to the complexity of signification in the ghetto. When the bouncer at the door to the club flirts with him, Guillaume decides that he's "faisable: bouche charnue, beaux lobes d'oreille, pas mal de poils dans l'échancrure de sa chemise noire." He then puts a couple of fingers between two buttons of the bouncer's shirt and finds even more hairs. Dustan writes, "je me dis que ça serait sûrement excitant comme confrontation, les siens et les miens" (JS 26). Here, body hair is clearly presented as sexually desirable, though not entirely in the same way as other physical attributes, attractive ear lobes for instance. For body hair in this context offers Guillaume the possibility of a sexual confrontation, a matching of his own hairy chest with that of another.

Later, however, body hair is presented as unappealing. Guillaume is standing shirtless in front of the mirror in the bathroom when a man comes out of one of the stalls and says, "Oh la la, t'es poilu dis donc!" The two men begin to discuss the relative merits of body hair. "Remarque, il y en a sûrement qui doivent aimer ça, il ajoute. -Ouais, j'ai plein de fans, je dis en marrant. -Mais quand même, les poils, comme ça, ça sent, il dit. -Tu délirés, je dis, moi, je sens toujours bon...je sens de miel" (JS 47). The man's comments indicate not only that he personally can't see anything attractive about body hair, but that he assumes

hairlessness to be the standard of beauty. He says, "il y en a sûrement qui doivent aimer ça," as if consoling Guillaume for this bodily defect.

The next mention of body hair firmly establishes that, indeed, "il y en a sûrement qui doivent aimer ça." Guillaume runs into someone with whom he had sex seven or eight years earlier and is introduced to the man's English boyfriend. Dustan writes, "Il me regarde avec attention. En fait, je pourrais même dire qu'il m'examine." The Frenchman then explains, "Il aime les poils." Guillaume decides that the Englishman isn't particularly desirable, in part because "je n'aime pas trop les mecs à peau claire et imberbe" (JS 52). As in the incident with the bouncer, body hair is presented as desirable, but again only in relation to a specific person's desire. No general theory of attraction is extrapolated.

The final mention of body hair in the book encapsulates these competing ideas about its sexual appeal and clearly engages the question of a standard of attraction. Guillaume is standing with several friends when "une petite folle" walks by and says, "Hou la la! Faut raser tout ça!" Guillaume doesn't respond; he simply looks at his friends and remarks, "C'est jeune" (JS 83). Here the insistence on shaving to appear hairless is denigrated as immature or at least youthful ("C'est jeune"), un-masculine ("petite folle"), and not even worthy of a direct response.⁸ Immediately afterwards, however, Guillaume reflects, "Je suis le seul avec un autre mec à ne pas avoir le torse rasé" (JS 84). The assessment of the desirability of body hair has now shifted from focusing on the presence or absence of hair on a particular body to the choice to shave one's hair or not. While body hair is initially presented as a question of body type, it now becomes another gauge of social customs or fashions.

This extended commentary on the varying signification of muscles and body hair in Dustan suggests that while bodily appearance takes on specific meanings in the ghetto, these meanings do not congeal into a single standard of attraction, though at times they may function as such. In other words, certain aspects of bodily appearance can be charged with meaning, but since these meanings are not formalizable, they can function simultaneously in different, even opposing ways.

The Ghetto Sexed

The communicative aspects of the body's appearance along with gestures, facial movements, and eye contact work together to facilitate sexual encounters. For we can never forget that Guillaume's ghetto is first and foremost a sexual ghetto:

Le sex est la chose centrale. Tout tourne autour: les fringues, les cheveux courts, être bien foutu, le matos, les trucs qu'on prend, l'alcool qu'on boit, les trucs qu'on lit, les trucs qu'on bouffe, faut pas être trop lourd quand on sort sinon on ne pourra pas baiser (DMC 75).

Participation in a sexual ghetto implies a certain self-consciousness about sex, or rather a certain valuing of sex. This is to say that sex is deemed important, worth thinking about, worth spending time and money on, worth improving, and worth talking about. For Dustan it is not a matter of claiming a gay identity and frequenting gay spaces, one must dedicate oneself to sex. Speaking about coming out in the *Têtu* interview, he says, "ils disent s'assumer, mais beaucoup n'ont pas voulu réellement s'interroger sur leur sexualité" (28).

Sex in Dustan's ghetto, thus, does not come naturally, but must be learned. Fortunately the ghetto offers many possible teachers: porno films; lovers ("Je pense à Quentin parce que c'est lui qui m'a appris à retirer les godes avant de jouir, pour ne pas endommager les sphincters" [DMC 34]); sex toys; and oneself ("Ça c'est moi qui me le suis appris tout seul" [DMC 34]). Furthermore, this learning process and the skills acquired thereby are what give sex its emotional value. When, after having sex, a trick tells Guillaume that he is "très ému," Guillaume asks him why: "Il a dit Parce que j'ai bandé sans me toucher pendant tout le temps que je t'ai fisté. J'ai dit C'est normal, c'est parce que tu l'as bien fait, moi quand je godais bien mon ex ça me faisait triquer comme un fou" (DMC 109). The emotional value of sex here never loses its sexual specificity. After all, the sign of being "très ému" is to "triquer comme un fou." In a similar manner, the monogamous couple, the standard legitimizing framework for emotion in relation to sexuality, loses its primacy. Guillaume describes the "mille mecs avec qui j'ai baisé" even as he tells his current lover that he's in the top four (DMC 26). For Guillaume,

then, sex derives its emotional meaning not from any extra-sexual sources, but from the well-performed sexual act itself – both as singular event and as part of a series of sexual encounters.

One of the most significant features of Dustan's ghetto, and one that of course distinguishes it from that of Guy Hocquenghem nearly twenty years earlier, is the presence of HIV/AIDS and the depictions of safe, and most importantly unsafe sex. Since the successful incorporation of safe sex practices within the lives of gay men in the 1980s and early '90s, depictions of unsafe sex have been almost non-existent, except as included as an aspect in the standard confessional of how one became infected.⁹ Recent debates in the US have focused attention on the persistent occurrence of unsafe sex, specifically on the fact that people, though cognizant of safe sex information, may still have unsafe sex.¹⁰ Unwilling to address the complexity of reasons why this may be occurring, several prominent American gay journalists have reacted with moralistic and condemnatory attacks, going so far as to discourage any discussion of these important issues. Dustan, again in the *Têtu* interview, implies that the situation is similar in France. "Lorsque j'écris, je tiens à tout dire, même ce qui est dérangeant, c'est pour cela que j'ai parlé de baise sans capote. Cela existe, mais personne n'ose parler" (28).

The particularities of AIDS in France bear mentioning here. Notoriously, France has nearly four times the instance of HIV infection of its European neighbors, a fact which has often been explained in terms of the peculiarly French relation to identity and community. France has not had the kind of gay community base from which other countries have developed both a pedagogy and a practice of safe sex. Of course, major health crises do not arise out of singular causes, but the peculiar French resistance to identity-based communities has undoubtedly prevented the formation of the institutional structures and community specific strategies which have been enormously successful in other parts of the world. So, when Dustan says "personne n'ose parler," the structures and the authority by which this silencing is enforced are significantly different from those by which nobody dares speak in the US. Certainly Dustan can draw on the French literary tradition of transgressive sexuality to say things which would be completely unacceptable in an Anglo-American con-

text.¹¹ Indeed, he doesn't refrain from recounting the almost mythological pleasures of this forbidden kind of sex. He describes how, for certain people, having unsafe sex takes precedence over all other sexual concerns. "En fait ce qui les intéresse c'est de se vautrer dans le foutre empoisonné, c'est une baise romantique et ténébreuse, je dis ça de façon condescendante, mais c'est vrai que c'est très fort" (DMC 133). But the transgressive alone is not enough to account for the frankness with which unsafe sex and the complications raised by its occurrence are treated in the novels. The characters consider a wide array of factors regarding sex, health, and risk level to varying degrees of consciousness and concern.

The first reference to unsafe sex in *Dans ma chambre* establishes the prevalence of HIV infection among gay men. A friend is talking about a particular sexual encounter when Guillaume asks if it was with or without a condom. The friend answers, "Tu sais personne ne met plus de capotes, même les américaines, maintenant tout le monde est séropositif, je ne connais plus personne qui soit séronégatif" (DMC 47). Guillaume realizes that, with the exception of his former lover, he doesn't know anyone negative either. This knowledge of living in a community with a high prevalence of HIV infection clearly affects decisions that Guillaume and others make regarding unsafe sex throughout the two books, as does more specific knowledge about HIV status, t-cell counts, and other health factors. Toward the end of *Dans ma chambre*, Guillaume responds to someone that he meets on the *minitel* whose pseudonym is "Bze sans kpote." Guillaume tells him that he wants to fuck him without a condom, but the man says that "il avait plutôt envie de baiser que de se faire baiser ce soir" (DMC 134). Guillaume doesn't want to agree to this, and the man decides not to come over. Dustan then makes it clear to the reader that the reason for his reluctance to get fucked without a condom is that his health hasn't deteriorated enough yet. He promises himself that "quand je serai descendu au dessous de deux cents t4, je m'y mettrai" (DMC 134). Here, Guillaume raises the important notion of different kinds, or levels, of despair in relation to making decisions about unsafe sex. His explanation of the difference between the degrees of risk

that he and the other man are willing to engage in is that "nous n'avions pas le même désespoir" (DMC 134).

One occasion in which unsafe sex occurs, described in a section appropriately entitled "Living in the Ghetto," succinctly shows the complex influences and values that can come into play. After having had dinner with a few friends, one of whose lover has just died, Guillaume is having trouble keeping an erection while he is trying to fuck his current boyfriend, Stéphane. He is vaguely depressed, though it is not entirely clear if that has any direct relation to the news of his friend's death. After a handful of botched attempts, he says:

Je débandais. J'ai fini par lui dire un tas d'horreurs. T'es pas excitant, tu me surprends pas, tu me fais mal les seins, je m'emmerde dans ton cul, excuse-moi en ce moment je suis déprimé, je préférerais que tu me baises. Ou alors je te baise sans capote. Il m'a dit Baise-moi sans capote. J'ai rebandé instantanément. (DMC 68)

A few minutes later, he tells Stéphane that he wants to come, and Stéphane tells him to go ahead. Dustan writes, "J'ai dit Je pense qu'il vaudrait mieux attendre le résultat de ton test. Le test, il ne l'a jamais fait. Il est persuadé qu'il est séropo de toute façon. C'est moi qui l'ai poussé à le faire" (Ibid.). He decides to withdraw and come outside of Stéphane. A week later, they learn that Stéphane's test results are negative. "Je me dis que j'ai bien fait de ne pas jouir dans son cul. Et puis je me sens seul. Déçu. Et puis seul" (DMC 69).

In this incident, the factors that come into play are numerous—the excitement of transgressive sex, the fatalism of the HIV negative, the persistence of conscious deliberation throughout the sexual encounter, and the desire not to be alone with HIV—but they are all shot through with the fatigue of living in a perpetual state of emergency. This fatigue is constitutive of the communal response to living with HIV. In *Je sors ce soir*, for example, Guillaume runs into an old friend with whom he trades news about acquaintances. "Je demande des nouvelles d'un autre type qu'on connaît d'une association sida qui avait dit à dîner il y a quatre ans que maintenant il baisait sans capotes avec son mec parce qu'il en avait marre" (JS 28). Perhaps not everyone

has “le même désespoir,” but no one seems to be able to escape it altogether.

Despite the many incidents of unsafe sex that are either described or referred to in the books, the value of safe sex remains firmly in place. Two examples illustrate this clearly. In *Je sors ce soir*, Guillaume runs into someone with whom he was involved in a group sexual encounter in which there was unprotected anal sex. He proposes having a private scene, but the man isn't interested. Guillaume consoles himself by saying, “Donc, tout est bien. Et puis, ça me fait quand même une occasion de baiser sans capotes en moins” (JS 36). Despite the fact that Guillaume is and has been HIV positive for years and has had many experiences of unsafe sex in that time, he still sees a value in having one less unsafe encounter.

The second example is from *Dans ma chambre* and takes place in a sex club. Guillaume is fucking a man in a sling without a condom. Shortly thereafter another man arrives on the scene.

Instinctivement, je suis plaqué contre le cul du mec pour empêcher l'autre de voir qu'on baisait sans capotes. Il a vu quand même. Il est parti. J'ai continué. J'ai senti que ça venait. Je me suis dit Est-ce que je jouis dedans, de toute façon c'est ça qu'il veut. Et puis je suis sorti et j'ai giclé par terre. (DMC 142)

The fact that Guillaume refers to the obscuring of his condomless cock as “instinctive” seems to reflect a bodily knowledge that unsafe sex is not generally acceptable. That Dustan does not attribute any reaction to the witness or any explanation for his departure underscores the communal quality of that unacceptability by refusing to locate it in an individual per se. In the public space of the sex club, Guillaume's desire not to be perceived as having unsafe sex then ironically attests to one aspect of the successful safe sex pedagogy—the establishment of safe sex as a community norm. However, despite his rationalization about his sex partner's desire, he still withdraws without explanation and ejaculates on the ground. This incident, together with those discussed above, highlights the complex process of negotiation that one confronts when having sex in the ghetto.

Though pervaded with different levels of despair, Guillaume Dustan's ghetto is not without hope. But like despair, this hope

also manifests itself through the body. In a rare moment in which Guillaume questions the value of his sexual practices, he finds himself recalling the lines spoken by Jeanne Moreau to her niece in a recent American movie, "Non, je ne pense pas que tu es stupide. Je pense que tu as perdu espoir" (DMC 73). Moreau then suggests that her niece wait and do absolutely nothing, for only then will hope return. Guillaume decides to accept Moreau's suggestion. He refrains from cruising on the *minitel* and from going out to a bar and simply waits: "Au bout de quelques moments effectivement, l'espoir est revenu. Il est revenu par la jambe gauche, je l'ai senti. Un apaisement musculaire" (DMC 73-74). In this amusing incident, the body which serves as the site of pleasure and of disease remains as well a possible site of hope. Though this bodily hope is made explicit here, it is no less present throughout the novels in the obsessive attention that Dustan pays to the physicality of the body. In a time when bodily desire has been stifled both by anti-sex hysteria in relation to AIDS and by the weight of safe sex information campaigns, the enabling of new possibilities for the body is one possible answer to Cindy Patton's call to rediscover "the complex of possible erotic practices that our bodies *already know*" (169).

These erotic practices of the body serve to locate and define the ghetto, much more than buildings ever could. Pat Califia, in an article about the red light districts in the city, alludes to this interplay of bodies and spaces when she notes that certain sexualized zones of the city, which are only so at night, may be unrecognizable as such during the day (205). Guy Hocquenghem expresses a similar notion in a description of the Tuileries, which only becomes activated as a ghetto space after hours: "Vous comprenez, quand ça ouvre au public, ça ferme pour nous" ("*Oiseau*" 166). Of course, nothing intrinsic to time makes these zones miraculously change as the sun goes down. The change is occasioned by the presence of sexualized bodies, bodies which, like those in Dustan's novels, already know how to turn certain spaces into a sexual ghetto. Perhaps, in the end, this is the great scandal of Dustan's books. Rather than engaging in the abstract debate about what might be the correct position for French homosexuals to take in relation to their minority status and identity, *Dans ma chambre* and *Je sors ce soir* simply attest to an al-

ready existing minoritarian sensibility, a ghetto, based on sexual practices and manifested through bodies.

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Notes

We would like to thank Vivian Sobchack for her comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

¹ Edmund White has noted the paradox that “the country that produced some of the most renowned homosexual writers of this century—Marcel Proust, André Gide, Jean Genet, Jean Cocteau—is also today the country that most vigorously rejects the very idea of gay literature” (340–341).

² References to this work will be cited in the text, using the abbreviation “DMC.”

³ References to this work will be cited in the text, using the abbreviation “JS.”

⁴ Virtually all of Guibert’s novels are exemplary of this style. For works which explicitly treat AIDS, see *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, *The Compassion Protocol*, and *Cytomegalovirus: Journal d’hospitalisation*.

⁵ Not coincidentally, this dossier is found in the same special issue of the magazine devoted to the Europride celebrations.

⁶ For a thorough discussion of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the minor in language and literature, see their *Thousand Plateaus* 75–100 and *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 16–27. See also Deleuze’s discussion in *One Manifesto Less*.

⁷ The straightforward presentation of events and concerns once again echoes the style of Hervé Guibert’s novels, as does the unstable relation between autobiography and fiction. In *Dustan*, however, the connection between individual and community is much stronger.

⁸ The denigration of the feminine is a disturbing presence in *Dustan*’s ghetto. In *Dans Ma Chambre* for instance, Terrier recounts to

Guillaume a sexual encounter with a man who has "le matos qu'il faut: pinces, godes, chaps en latex, slip en cuir. Terrier me dit Ouais mais je le trouve trop féminin et j'aime pas ça, moi il me faut un mec plus solide" (98). This eroticization of the masculine seems to exclude even the possibility of male femininity as desirable.

⁹ For information of the safe sex pedagogy in the US in the 1980s, see Patton 3-34.

¹⁰ Excellent overviews of the situation in the US can be found in Warner and Bronski.

¹¹ For a discussion of the French literary tradition of the transgressive in relation to AIDS, see Worth 93-95.

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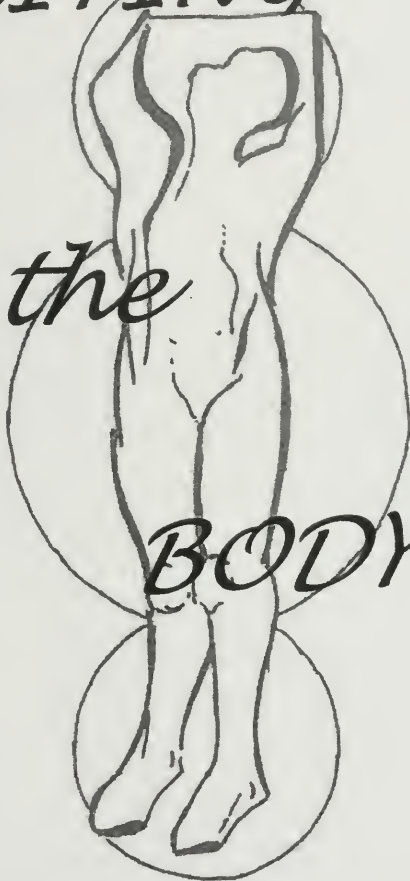
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PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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