Intimacy as Transparency

Pleasure and Solidarity in Parisian AIDS Narratives

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Content warning: Discussion of AIDS, drugs, and suicide attempts.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first struck and masking and social distancing slowly became more commonplace, many found it difficult to feel intimacy in a time that necessitated it most. As a queer college student myself, the unexpected move back to my conservative hometown made me question how to replicate the communities and intimacies I enjoyed on campus, despite not being physically present. For several reasons, this pandemic piqued my interest in the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and ’90s, when queer communities were devastated and sexual intimacy as a whole was threatened. While these two pandemics are by no means completely analogous, the ability of people living with AIDS to successfully create queer community in spite of medical and social obstacles struck a particular chord with me.

In this essay, I use the term “intimacy” to refer to a sentiment of emotional proximity between two or more people. For queer theorist Lauren Berlant, intimacy principally “involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out a particular way” (281). At its core, an intimate practice is one that allows individuals to share themselves, to know each other more closely, and to work towards a narrative together. In the French society of the 1990s, the dominant heteronormative narrative deemed marriage and sex the most intimate acts largely for their procreative potential, as they produced the ideal emotional proximity and contained this proximity to the perfect nuclear family. In turn, as Berlant notes, queer is forced to find alternative methods of being intimate, whether it be their own non-procreative sex or emotionally invested practices that disavow sex completely. Although sex is heavily present within the work explored in this essay, it becomes clear that queer intimacy does not simply turn straight sex on its head by virtue of having gay participants, but rather that queer intimacy can hold a more subversive role by hinging on sexual objectification and producing emotional proximity on a larger, communal level.

The explicitly sexual, gay, HIV+ community of Guillaume Dustan’s 1996 autofiction Dans ma chambre (In My Room) is one such example of a queerly subversive and intimate environment. Taking place in the insular gay ghetto of central Paris’s Marais neighborhood, Dans ma chambre recounts the everyday goings-on of Guillaume, Dustan’s fictionalized persona, including his romantic ventures, sexual encounters, and heavy usage of drugs. While it is notable that Guillaume rarely speaks about his AIDS – in fact, the word “sida [AIDS]” only appears once in the novel – he is particularly explicit with regards to his sexual encounters, going so far as to provide whole litanies of every single dildo used in a given night. Guillaume’s narration is often impersonal, cold, and ethnographic, detailing the intense happenings of his surroundings in various clubs with various men while seldom providing input on his emotional wellbeing.

Throughout Dans ma chambre, Guillaume’s detached and pornographic narration of his sexual encounters suggests that sex is a banal, emotionless endeavor whose main purpose is pleasure. Despite this, he extends a profound care for the many men he has sex with, signifying a preestablished emotional proximity. If the act of sex itself does not produce this emotional proximity between Guillaume and his partners, as it does for straight couples approved by heteronormative society, what role can pleasure and its surrounding discourse play in producing intimacy? Sex’s unabashed focus on pleasure – easily achieved through a system of communal objectification – may seem to prohibit its capacity for interpersonal intimacy, in that heteronormative society vilifies sexual pleasure in an effort to glorify a vision of intimacy founded on procreation (Berlant 283). However, it is paradoxically this same consensus on sex’s end goal and the objectifying means used to achieve it among the inhabitants of Dustan’s ghetto that allows a communal intimacy to permeate. In the year 2021, as we continue to live through the COVID-19 pandemic, the queer ghetto reminds us that openly acknowledging the goals we wish to achieve from our relationships – whether they be pleasure, friendship, companionship – is empowering, not does it erase an emotional proximity found within. Rather, such an acknowledgement can serve as a fortified and personalized foundation for emotional closeness when the usual covert ways of expressing intimacy are no longer an option.

Economy of Feelings in the Ghetto

Dustan opens the novel in media res, plunging the reader directly into the culture of the ghetto. In the first sentence, Guillaume states, “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 [I left the room to Quentin, I moved into the little room in the back of the apartment so I wouldn’t hear them fuck!]” (Dustan 11). As this is the first sentence of the novel, the reader does not know who Quentin is, nor the person having sex with him. The abrupt nature of this opening and its lack of context immediately includes the reader in an in-group perspective, as a member of the ghetto who would instinctively know Guillaume’s friends. Several pages later, Guillaume nonchalantly mentions that Quentin is his ex-boyfriend and is currently romantically involved with Nico, also a friend of Guillaume’s and possibly an ex of his as well. This opening vignette establishes the relationship between the gays and the environment of the ghetto they are submersed in, the only exposition the reader receives is being thrust headfirst into an entangled web of gay relationships and hookups. Every gay man in the ghetto knows every other gay man, with the reader entering into this perspective as well.

However, not only is every man in the ghetto assumed to be gay and to have an enmeshed sexual history with every other man, but it is also assumed that every man in the ghetto is HIV+. At a club, Quentin says to Guillaume, “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 [‘You know, nobody wears condoms anymore, even Americans, now everyone’s HIV+, I don’t know anyone who’s HIV-].” to which Guillaume’s internal monologue replies, “moi non plus, je pense, à part Quentin [me neither, I think, besides Quentin]” (Dustan 53). In contrast to the outside world, where seronegativity is the norm, Quentin’s seronegativity inside the ghetto is a notable feature. In this sense, the insular nature of the ghetto subculture of Paris makes it different from the rest of 1990s Paris: homosexuality and seronativity, instead of heterosexualism and seronegativity.

Guillaume’s narration of his sexual encounters reveals not only what he thinks of them, but also the functions that sex holds within the ghetto subculture. He describes a scene with his soon-to-be long-term boyfriend, Stéphane:

Je cherche quelque chose de répétitif mais pas froid pour me faire goder. Il est cinq heures du mat, Stéphane commence à être fatigué, il...
However, the prosthesis logic of the ghetto does not only serve a purpose on an individual level. Rivas acknowledges its potential for the formation of community: "According to this logic, Dustan’s (supposedly) universally HIV-positive community’s dismissal of inferiority in favour of superficiality signals a desire to continue living and emerges as a method of grappling with life’s precariousness" (45). Sex serves several purposes in and for the ghetto: it is a coping mechanism, it is a rejection of the death sentence that AIDS had decreed and it is a process of interpersonal bonding around a common goal. Although Rivas focuses his analysis more on how sex helps Guillaume grapple with his own AIDS diagnosis, he does not deny sex's capacity for communal healing. In Dustan’s eyes, the entire ghetto is suffering from AIDS communally, coping communally through pleasure-centered sex. As sex is depersonalized and pornographic, all parties in the ghetto refuse to put on airs with regards to their reason for partaking in it. Acknowledging sex’s utility in giving and receiving pleasure in spite of a debilitating disease is a way in which the ghetto community fulfills its physical and emotional needs. While Rivas only defines the result of communal objectification as a sexual practice, I argue here that this same communal objectification can also result in demonstrations of emotional and social solidarity.

(Intimacy Built on Utility)

The fulfillment of both individual ghetto residents’ needs and the needs of the seropositive ghetto community as a whole leads to a particular form of solidarity among neighbors. One such example is a scene in which Terrier, Guillaume’s ex-boyfriend, interrupts a ménage à trois between Guillaume, Stéphane, and a man they pick up at a club by knocking on Guillaume’s door and begging to sleep in his guest room, to which Guillaume reluctantly agrees (Dustan 131). Having already drunk an entire bottle of whiskey, Terrier locks himself in Guillaume’s bathroom and swallows a whole container of anti-anxiety pills, effectively attempting suicide. Despite Guillaume’s intense hatred for Terrier before this episode and hating him even more once he realizes what Terrier is doing in the bathroom, he calls an ambulance and rides along to the hospital. Narrating from the inside of the emergency room, Guillaume says:

“J’ai demandé ce qui allait se passer. L’infirmière m’a dit qu’on allait lui faire un lavage d’estomac et qu’il fallait que j’attende. Alors j’ai attendu. Je sais qu’il n’avait rien à attendre mais je ne pouvais pas partir.”

[Intimacy Built on Utility]

(Dustan 135)

His animosity towards Terrier notwithstanding, Guillaume knows intrinsically that he cannot leave him at the hospital, unable to articulate the reason why he is waiting despite there being nothing to wait for. One might argue that any person in Guillaume’s situation would refuse to leave alone the person who attempts suicide in their home, but his decision to visit Terrier a second time after the night of the suicide attempt demonstrates that his care and concern go beyond his initial feeling of guilt (Dustan 136).

In this example, Guillaume exhibits a type of emotional proximity and investment towards Terrier that is closely linked to the importance the ghetto community places on sex. Having no obligation to him on a personal level begs the question: why does he go to such lengths to show intimate care for him when the constant objectionation that Rivas elucidates transforms sex’s role in the ghetto unrecognizably from its analogous form in straight Paris, the purpose of communal care in queer ghetto sex also informs all other relationships in this environment. Checking in on someone after a suicide attempt and having sex are both forms of care in the ghetto, allowing a space for one person to give care and another to receive. In other words, while Guillaume may look to Terrier or any other ghetto resident as an object for sexual gratification, in doing so, he also looks to them for a lifegiving care to both receive from them and give to them. In a sense, the logic of prosthesis renders Terrier’s personal history with Guillaume less important in favor of a relationship in which the former receives care from the latter. Despite the fact that this objectification is seen most clearly in the pornographic ways Guillaume narrates his sexual encounters, it also leads to a duty he feels to care for his HIV+ brothers. Guillaume’s commitment to showing intimate care for Terrier is representative of a system of ghetto solidarity that extends beyond their particular relationship.

The Primacy of Transparency in Pandemic-Time Intimacy

Among the queers of Dustan’s ghetto, there exists a new, queer intimacy that relies on the communal agreement of pleasure’s centrality in sex, in stark contrast with the heteronormative intimacy heralded in straight couples’ marriage and procreation. By sharing a consensus among themselves that having sex is only a means of experiencing pleasure, the ghetto queers redefine this new, queer intimacy that is no longer reliant on “the shifting registers of unspoken ambivalence” (Berlant 286), but rather, on an open sharing of values. In other words, while straight couples may feel that talking openly about their relationship may jeopardize their intimacy – as Berlant puts it, heteronormative intimacy “prefers the calm of internal pressure, the taken-for-grantedness” (286) – the queers of Dustan’s ghetto find power and closeness instead through open communication, the opposite of this “unspoken ambivalence.” As the AIDS epidemic forced many queers to rethink the ways in which spoken and unspoken rules interact in their romantic and sexual lives – for example, the then-rising commonplaceness of asking for one’s HIV status – the queer inhabitants of the Marais find that, to sustain their emotional proximity with each other, they must proudly acknowledge their sexualization of each other and derive strength from it.

As we continue to struggle to maintain a physical and emotional closeness to our friends and loved ones due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we too must reconsider the extent to which our practices of intimacy production rely on “unspoken ambivalence,” and whether this ambivalence facilitates or impedes intimacy. Just as the importance of transparency regarding HIV status sparks difficult conversations for many gays, the request for proof of a negative COVID test or a vaccination card similarly forces couples to set firm boundaries and openly speak about intimacy. While HIV transmission is deeply linked to sex in a way that COVID is not, the choice for two people to spend time together unmasked may now be presented as a new emotional decision that affects their health, made by speaking openly about boundaries, similarly to the way in which gay men’s choice to have sex during the height of the AIDS

s’endort, mais il m’a dit que c’était ok, je peux le réveiller pour qu’il me gode.

[J’m looking for something repetitive but not stale to put on the record player while I get a dildo up the ass. It’s 5 in the morning, Stéphane is starting to get tired, but he told me it’s okay. I can wake him up so he can do it].

(Dustan 36)

The repetitive music he is searching for suggests a repetitive sexual atmosphere, to the point that his partner is falling asleep. Narrating matter-of-factly, Guillaume refrains from commenting on his emotional investment. One could argue that his refrain from narrating the emotionality of sex does not preclude the overall existence of such emotionality, but his straightforward tone and ambivalence towards Stéphane suggests that emotions are not at the forefront of the sexual encounter. In the ghetto, sex is a frequent, quotidian, and mundane experience whose principal, if not only, function is to receive pleasure. As Guillaume puts simply in the only sentence that comes close to acknowledging his emotional input during this sexual episode, “J’aime les sensations fortes [I like strong sensations]” (Dustan 37).

While leaders of the HIV/AIDS activist group ACT UP-Paris contended in the 90s that Dustan and his ghetto neighbors’ brazen focus on sexual pleasure rendered them hedonists (Rivas 34), literary scholar Joshua Rivas theorizes instead that pleasure in the ghetto, where every man is supposedly gay, HIV+, enters into a “logic of prosthesis” (38). In the ghetto, where every man is supposedly gay, HIV+, and sexually intertwined, the logic of prosthesis allows Guillaume and his neighbors to “eroticize the failings and un-wholeness of [their] bod[ies] and make of them something productive” (Rivas 38). Rivas relates their seropositive bodies to bodies with an amputated limb, in the sense that both examples are physically defective. The ghetto community functions in that each resident constantly objectifies every other resident, to the point that even genitals and dildos are seen as interchangeable extensions of the body, since they serve the same purpose (Rivas 39). This omnipresent objectification and the subsequent mutual understanding between ghetto residents with regards to sex’s function – to give and receive pleasure – is what sustains the physically hurting queers of the Marais in the face of AIDS. In this sense, sex is a form of care that ghetto community members impart from one to another.
epidemic jeopardized their health at a more dangerous rate. At first glance, it may seem daunting to speak frankly and set boundaries with our loved ones about the platonic, romantic, or sexual pleasure we receive from our relationships spending time with them. When the tacit agreement of emotional closeness is no longer as evident due to geographical separation and thus fails to provide the type of pleasure formerly received, speaking honestly about this failure in an effort to rectify it can prove to be more fruitful than continuing to stay silent in a vain hope that pandemic restrictions will be lifted overnight. Even while intimacy can still prevail, despite and through masking and social distancing, COVID has forced many formerly ordinary activities to spark more overt and uncomfortable conversations about interpersonal pleasure.

An extension of Rivas's theories of sexual objectification and pleasure to both the social environment of *Dans ma chambre* and the social disruption of our current pandemic reality may help us to feel more intimate with our loved ones, despite the glaring lack of physical proximity. While seeing our loved ones as simply objectified means to an end — especially to the extreme of Dustan — is not necessarily beneficial in a COVID-19 context, this utilitarian approach to viewing relationships does have the potential to shape our intimacy into a stronger form on our own terms. Talking openly with our loved ones about how we want to be intimate, instead of guessing silently and ambivalently, provides an avenue not only to create an intimacy counter to the dominant heteronormative system, as it functions in the case of Dustan's ghetto, but also simply to fashion an intimacy that satisfies one's needs. Particularly as we trudge forward in our COVID-19 reality and this satisfaction of one's needs becomes ever so difficult, the communal transparency shared among Guillaume and his neighbors — despite (or through) his exaggeratedly cold and pornographic style of writing — teaches us that, to experience pleasure in our relationships, intimacy can and should be spoken aloud.

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Notes

1 Dustan uses the term "ghetto" in the original French to refer to the gay enclave within the Marais. This term does not carry the same racially charged connotations as it does in American English, but rather it borrows from the term's usage during World War II, when Italian Jews were legally forced to live in ghetto neighborhoods (Caron 79). As the Marais is simultaneously the epicenter of Paris's Jewish and gay communities, the latter group has over time also adopted the term "ghetto" for themselves.

2 The English translations provided throughout this essay are my own.

Works Cited


