

# Imagining Positive Geographies:

## French AIDS writing in the 1990s as refusing and destabilising the Psycho-social Untouchable Body

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L'oubli de soi? Il y avait déjà tant de livres qui existaient sur la cause de cette disparition peut-être bête comme chou.

L'écriture c'est la folie, c'est à la fois la folie et la raison, le raisonnement de la folie.

Guibert, *Le Paradis* p.125

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For Guibert, there is something untenable about living with AIDS. And in a culture at pains to equate AIDS with death and manage the HIV-positive body out of the picture as the wasting away of the once whole(some), existing is not resisting, since there is no social or psychological visibility other than as sign of your own absence. Pyrrhically surviving in books into the syndrome's second decade, Guibert's introspective, autobiographical responses to his HIV-status in texts such as *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* and *Le protocole compassionnel* have been dismissed as 'du côté de la mort',<sup>1</sup> his writing as coterminous with the perspective of his mortality.<sup>2</sup> But as Leslie Hill points out, 'l'écriture de Guibert nous conduit ... aussi vers une expérience de l'impossibilité de la mort qui nous enseigne que la vie, à son tour, n'est après tout qu'un intense mourir sans fin', comprising 'le plus grand malheur et le plus grand bonheur à la fois'.<sup>3</sup>

Spinning away from sense, refusing the socially permitted non-discourse of AIDS identity, his posthumous novel *Le Paradis* opens up notions of textual self-representation as strategic assault on the psycho-social parameters of the body as healthy sign. Operating according to Deleuze and Guattari's logic of 'la littérature mineure', a literature which undermines by rewriting the individual as site of collective politics,<sup>4</sup> this is a text which allows its author to reinvent himself to write as HIV-negative, heterosexual, as other than a writer. Leaving behind Northern Europe for Africa, for Martinique, for Bora Bora, Guibert the author journeys to parallel and virtual identities which he may or may not have made as protagonist and as person. He stops making sense there, or hopes to, as the fundamentals of Western logic (absence/presence, body/mind, real/unreal) collapse, dissolving textual boundaries and threatening to overflow from a fiction containable as exoticist fantasy, through reading as contamination, seeping into consciousness of differently valued experience, where the positions occupied by life and death, virus and host, social and abject actually become realigned rather than just evaded. *Le*

*Paradis* spirals into and beyond paradox. If AIDS endangers Guibert's self, it is also the physical refocusing which brings to his attention other aspects of self, routinely suppressed in the West. While literally diluted to a trace element in the narrative, the theme of the body with AIDS dictates the impulsive departures, doublings and delusions which texture it: from its obsession with tasting paradise before death to the case for (non-)identity with the virus that reorganises and destroys (has destroyed) the body of the text, the novel takes its author away from and into his agony. The text responds to the ambiguous and hallucinatory call of the other life, of cloning the self as flexible other bodies whose viral mutations release and repeat: 'je voudrais être triple, quadruple, un danseur, un gangster, un funambule, un peintre, un skieur, j'aimerais faire du delta-plane et me jeter dans le vide, foncer comme un bolide sur les pistes dont la neige serait de l'héroïne'.<sup>5</sup>

More than a literature of escapism, much recent French AIDS writing reworks the genre as resistance writing: allocated the literature of the personal as the seemly site of identity- containment, positive bodies have accepted to write themselves into the autobiographical, but in the process and across the genre, from diary to confession to autofiction, what emerges is a series of inventive disorderings and imaginative refusals of identity which threaten the collapse of mediatic comfort zones. Six stylistically quite different texts push into the anti-social territories of reasoned madness reconnoitred by *Le Paradis*. In varying ways, 1990's French AIDS writing, here represented by texts by Gilles de Barbedette, Pascal de Duve, Barbara Samson, Mano Solo, Christophe Bourdin and Vincent Borel, undermines the imputed self-centeredness which would make of the syndrome an individual tragedy, and points towards a realignment of the psycho-social body beyond the parameters imposed by the simu-family of macro-nation. The response of a generation to the compulsively televisual war in the Gulf, as Borel writes, was 'une furieuse envie de danser, ne serait-ce que pour crier son désaccord',<sup>6</sup> celebrating the relationships between the body and techno(logy) and reimagining the image as image. In similar ways, the most effective textual and lived subversions available to people caught in the full and fascinating glare of the AIDS war emerge as those able to disrupt the assaults of nationally consumed discourses as well as defusing the biological virus.

Three forms of psycho-social resistance to the dominant real of state AIDS will be considered here, each disrupting the places of the personal. Firstly there is a refusal to acknowledge the reality of the self as subject to (or of) death. Barbedette, with his refusal to mourn and move on from the death of his lover, Jean, colonises limbo as an alternative social in *Mémoires d'un jeune homme devenu vieux*, as living with his grief becomes more viable than the hurt of having it unacknowledged. Writing in Duve's *L'Orage de vivre* is a scream of affirmation in idiolectic tongues which textually replicates but delays the onset of dementia. Refusing the place of death in contemporary society, his writing infiltrates the language of denial to find ways of expressing proscribed pain: 'Je t'écris en m'écriant'.<sup>7</sup> Samson and Solo each call into question the establishment of the individual's definition and social value through conventional sexual relationships; Samson's *On n'est pas sérieux quand on a dix-sept ans* by deriding myths of self-justification through

romance and sex held out as plenitude; Solo's collection of poems, *Je suis là*, through asserting desire and non-desire outside the circuits of reciprocity. Longer texts by Bourdin (*Le Fil*) and Borel (*Un Ruban noir*) artfully deconstruct the sense of self as sacrosanct citadel and social cornerstone, rejecting culpabilisation and the Cartesian values of the North, they transmute and migrate with the virus into indiscriminate, undifferentiated Souths, summoning alternative circuits of freer socialisation than those available in the capital. All six texts reject Paris as the prickly and hyper-regulatory partisan of the closed system, self-containment and abstract alienation - attributes which rather than providing protection, stand accused of promoting mindsets and lifestyles propitious to infection, and of promoting the viral, post hoc, as the negative simulacrum which justifies its focus on defence.

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Like *Le Paradis* and Guibert's hospital diary, *Cytomégalo-virus*, Duve and Barbedette's texts were published posthumously. And as Guibert's writing comes to rhythm and rival his life in ways which incorporate and proposition his readers, *L'Orage de vivre* and *Mémoires d'un jeune homme devenu vieux* also refuse simple subjective transcendence through art. These two texts are unworked and eclectic collections of thoughts, brought together by friends from different notebooks and diaries in works of collaboration and 'bricolage' which already displace not only the absoluteness of death, but the discreteness of the individual life too. Conforming with Guibert's intertextured and provisional self - writing to the Barthesian anti-structure of the fragment, Duve and Barbedette break up what counts as the self's discourse: text happens as a hygiene, but also an aubaine - rather than shoring up the social immunity of the defensive self which AIDS selectively afflicts, each practices a stylistic 'entraînement' in vulnerability and transparency, writing themselves in the everyday, which paradoxically becomes a necessary source of strength and economy of self-expression.

Both Duve and Barbedette appear as isolated and solitary, living death, yet while Barbedette's notes read as mourning uncompleted, which is also his own preparation for death, Duve reconstructs life through one of the principles of 'la littérature mineure' which Lévy and Nouss discover in earlier texts as 'une parole migrante, traversant les milieux sociaux et les appartenances nationales'.<sup>8</sup> Barbedette's tribute to Jean is the textual 'mimétisme' of his lover which colours what remains of his own life. By writing Jean into his everyday practices (of diary, novel, reading, cats, friends), he sees himself as writing against and revalorising the scandals of isolation and deprivation which AIDS imposes. He describes his project as a communication between death and life:

Je sais que Jean continuera de vivre en moi. Il m'incombe de poursuivre son existence interrompue.  
Quand il est mort, j'aurais voulu m'incorporer à lui, à ses dernières larmes.<sup>9</sup>

In *L'Orage de vivre*, Duve uses his notebooks to practice various strategies for undermining the linguistic tyranny of HIV and AIDS, textualising himself (a

writing which connects beyond contexts) through a practice of (dis)empowering maxim mantra such as the following selection:

- La Mort est débile; la Vie est indélébile.
- Moralité: il est mort alité
- *Il faut savoir ouvrir les cieux.*
- Mais quels étaient donc les noirs desseins de ce mystérieux peintre de la Nuit?
- Que meure la Mort! Que vive la Vie!
- Abîmer la maladie et animer la Vie.<sup>10</sup>

Longer sections written in Metro stations discover spaces beneath the official discourses of Paris to be a different kind of self, making a virtue out of the necessity of 'l'attente', initiating a self of dialogue as 'un chuchotement d'encouragement de moi-même à cet autre moi-même, par le truchement de la matérialité des mots'.<sup>11</sup>

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The texts by Samson and Solo are concerned with the forms of social exclusion which surrounds drug users in France, and the instability of the zones of intimacy to which they have recourse. Samson's extended 'témoignage' tells of her affair with Antony, whom she meets at a clinic near Aix-en-Provence, where she is receiving treatment for an eating disorder. After being seduced by his poetry, she discovers he is there for a drug-related problem: she becomes HIV positive. The siege on her body initiated against her family can be seen as moving to wider social revolt: Samson's eventual appearance as the opening speaker on the national television AIDS appeal re-enacts the embodied paradoxes of disappearance/presence affront/plea of anorexia on a wider scale. Likewise her recourse to Rimbaud's poem of youthful revolt, which provides the title, subtitles and structure to *On n'est pas sérieux quand on a dix-sept ans*, signals how the psychological tensions are also product and process of the social: Samson's body modification through immunoconversion works across the mythemes of family, sex/romance and place which construct self. Specifically it suggests and withholds articulation of an ambivalence around appearance as seduction. The body beautiful of the other as socially programmed promise of self-value is rejected as con, as she discovers that Antony's poems are only the copied lyrics of Jim Morrison's songs. Victim in her life, Samson's text, however, both condemns Antony's seduction and puts deception in the perspective of his marginalised position within civic discourse:

Lui dire que je ne le crois pas, que ses textes ne sont pas de lui, le lui enfoncer dans la tête, c'est l'humilier et lui faire perdre cet espoir, ce rêve qu'il traîne au fond de lui.<sup>12</sup>

Both 'Antony's' poetry and Samson's straightforward autobiographical account operate as ideologically familiar self-presentations to the other (as lover or social body) through flirting, seduction or composure. However, the fatuousness of Antony's copies and the radical undecidabilities of Samson's

social and familial attachments/detachments each erode seemingly seamless practices of idealisation, revealing their oppressive and damaging potential. Instead of assessing the self's physical insertion within the world through its desire, sexuality, hunger, gift, in terms of authenticity or self-composure, the relational, contextual are taken into account in ways which mainstream France's preoccupation with personal responsibility, the civil self and its complicity with 'modes of infection' never does.

Also marginalised by his drug dependency and HIV-positive status, Solo's poetry follows anti-surrealistic trajectories through unelective places with no chance encounters:

Paris finit toujours par accoucher devant tes yeux  
de ce qui n'existait pas  
ce qui n'existait plus  
et là comme ça en un instant  
tout peut recommencer  
ça ne s'est pas passé  
mais ça aurait pu.<sup>13</sup>

Exploring the tension between his desire for sexual intimacy and his self-perception as undesirable, Solo uses the wind to figure as a force which disrupts and blows apart the conventional and the Parisian in unpredictable ways, offering riskier forms of relation and identity, 'là-bas', tearing up dichotomies of ill/well, dead/alive, love/loneliness as 'le vent passe et brasse/mélange et balaye'.<sup>14</sup> A recurring theme is unpredictability, be it of climate, displacement between Toulouse and Paris, or rejection by women or in the streets, but in many of the poems Solo comes to find consolation and value in change and flux as opposed to the fixed values of conventional society. In a *Nouvel Observateur* interview he talks of his time on the canal barge where he wrote much of *Je suis là*, saying that at least he wasn't inside (his apartment, his body's statistical battle to maintain T4 cells or the mediatised discourses around AIDS which took over France in the late 1980's and early 1990's):

'Je faisais partie de la vie... J'ai toujours vécu parmi des gens volontaires pour la vie. J'ai grandi dans un esprit militant. Ne pas me laisser écraser par la société, c'était déjà un acte militant'.<sup>15</sup>

It is the militancy of a lust for life where none should be that his poetry communicates. The sentiments and registers differ markedly from *Le Paradis*, but Samson's true-life confession and Solo's lyricisation of the abject pose similar queries about what constitutes authenticity and textual presence by selfs which function as the programmed social.

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Written in 'tu', the first book of Bourdin's *Le Fil* rehearses the caution and cossetting of the hypochondriac who constructs his body as organism of defence, prickly as the sea-urchin image of HIV used by Borel too. From

climactic precautions to fitness training and impersonality, 'tu' builds a body of imaginary defences which make him 'intouchable', immune. Yet the virtual disease materially infiltrates Bourdin's citadels of lists, and his body, self, text, imperceptibly acquire the identity of that which they were designed to withstand, until he is abandoned to

un air maladif, comme si un événement l'avait privé, en les coupant, de ces fils imaginaires et verticaux, qui redressent naturellement toujours le dos de ceux qui savent qu'ils sont valides...<sup>16</sup>

The middle book recalls the notes of Duve and Barbedette, diary entries dealing with daily battles to imagine body and self as positive from perspectives other than the fatally charged social consensus, while the third, 'Temps du rêve', returns to the second person. This time, defined as neither a cautious and contained 'tu' or the sort of 'vous' which interpellates AIDS identity as fear<sup>17</sup> Bourdin tells himself and his dream lover of their trip to a conditionally-tensed Mediterranean paradise of undifferentiation and free-flow under a scorching sun, where 'Vos désirs, alors, seraient infinis' (Bourdin 1994, 183), far from the fearful and controlled self of the first book. Far from a hypothetical holiday, the entire texture of Bourdin's prose has mutated, in the process reconstructing his identity as affirmative and confident without being exclusionary. In place of the defensive Parisian complicit with all the oppression and torturousness through which capital France constructs and permits its subjects as adequate, measureable and anxious, Bourdin ends the text happy with his sexuality and shows his readers how to get there from where they are now.

*Un Ruban noir* begins with a long and lyrically experimental episode set extra-hexagonally in Eurorave gay Barcelona, where André, the narrator, is seeking to lose himself, literally forget his 'sida', in trancedance, Acid and wild sex with Miguel. Spurred on by a visiting French friend, the narrator confesses his HIV-positive status to his lover. At the same time this exchange is also a difficult self-confrontation, going beyond the melodrama of personal responsibility which colours a parallel situation in Cyril Collard's *Les Nuits fauves*: Borel splits his persona into a 'tu' he calls an 'assassin' and a 'je' who looks beyond the individual for reasons for his unprotected sex in his fugue from 'la logique Paris. Baise, gaspille-toi et va t'en!<sup>18</sup> It is this logic for which the middle section of the novel seeks a radical antidote. Rejecting the morality of the omnivore as a danger equal to AIDS, André is drawn to alternative approaches to therapy, health and ultimately philosophy, which completely redraw the parameters of virus and host, well and ill. Ozone treatment which regenerates the blood through aeration, a diet of immediate raw food called 'instinctothérapie', and the physical freedom found in dancing to house music become ways of returning to Gaïa, with, and even through, AIDS rather than further alienation through the toxicity of AZT. Although his mentor, Le Doc, is defeated (as much by the weight of the media as by the onset of symptomatic AIDS), unlike Muzil's role in prefiguring Guibert's agony in *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, Le Doc's acts to spur André on to further excess, and the novel closes with a return to techno, drugs and hard sex but now free from individuated guilt, and culminating in an out of space station

Alpha in the year 2006, when HIV has mutated into harmlessness, managed by the smooth gymnastics of 'l'immunomodulation' which, with a pleasant irony, rebuilds the positive body as beautiful, more beautiful than before.

What enables Borel's characters to actualise what is only hypothesised in *Le Fil*, is a re-emphasis of the place of AIDS. More than an isolated physical and medical condition, AIDS in *Un Ruban noir* is also attitude: Bourdin's hypochondria becomes Borel's 'hypocondrie gaie',<sup>19</sup> as the rediscovery and realignment of the body's harmony with the mind and with the Earth, during his visits to Barcelona, Arles and Cassis, and his immersion in dance, become global therapies against a disease which is predominantly deployed ideologically. Borel refracts social culpabilisation back onto the petty politics of self/other which structure the individual's place in France and the West, where initiatives such as World Aids Day serve only to further isolate and weigh upon the immunodepressed as part of 'un gigantesque videogame mondial où votre non-moi déglingue un peu plus son moi déjà bien esquiné'.<sup>20</sup> *Un Ruban noir* moves beyond first-person narrative to function most fully as a critique of French social organisation capable of creating a new caste of 'Intouchables' (echoing Bourdin's differently slanted use of the term), and a radical step towards reinventing the psycho-social of body and mind in less corrosive ways. If 'le séropo évolue dans une zone où l'idée fait mal',<sup>21</sup> then therapy comes with rethinking the idea of AIDS. André address his AIDS to provide a counter-ideology:

Mais réfléchis sale idiot: nous devons parvenir à un accord, car si tu me tues, tu te tueras aussi. Alors laisse-moi en paix. Je ne penserai pas à ma mort, je n'accélérerais pas le processus de l'apoptose, ce suicide interne que toi, virus, tu commandes à mes cellules. Il me faut une nouvelle transe pour contrer ton message, je dois déprogrammer ta désintégration, ligaturer à jamais tes sacs d'ARN. Que l'on me donne donc de la techno pour combattre la Mère de toutes les Peurs, la Mort.<sup>22</sup>

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The textual strategies emerging from a new generation of writers from different genders, sexualities, regions, class, status, literariness, and so-called risk groups diverge wildly in style, focus, and genre. Yet as if taking their cue from Guibert's project of turning the untenability of AIDS inside out, each engages in strategies which disclose the untenability of the pseudo-healthy psycho-social body. Whether side-stepping a redundant tyranny of life's separation from death, claiming self in text irrespective of relational straight-jackets, or modifying body through the immunomodulations of the mind, each travels through the Southern-most limits of France, significantly away from the defensive capital which acts as keystone to the nationally fixed hierarchies of viral thinking, not just to escape from oppressive and restrictive national discourses around AIDS, but to palpably actualise the virtual in positively paradisiacal ways, for 'Ta mort serait incompatible avec le soleil'.<sup>23</sup>

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## Notes

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2. Joseph Lévy and Alexis Nouss. **Sida-Fiction, Essai d'Anthropologie Romanesque**. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1994, p.87.
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5. Hervé Guibert. **Cytomégalovirus**. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992, p.117.
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7. Pascal de Duve. **Cargo Vie**. Paris: Editions Jean-Claude Lattès, Le Livre de Poche, 1993, p.66.
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20. Borel. **Un Ruban noir**, p.229.

21. Borel. **Un Ruban noir**, p.230.

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Lévy and Nouss and Maxence provide discussions of French AIDS writing from earlier years. Boulé collects essays on Guibert and gives a bibliography.

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He is currently organising a major international **Conference on AIDS in France** in London on 1 Dec 1997, which may be of interest to readers. For details, please contact [Dr Murray Pratt](#).