Making monsters: heterosexuality, crime and race in recent Western media coverage of HIV

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Abstract
In the early HIV epidemic, Western media coverage encouraged the idea that infection was linked to ‘other’ identities located outside the ‘mainstream’; outside ‘proper’ heterosexuality. Today, however, HIV has become repositioned as a global heterosexual epidemic. Analyses show that since the 1990s Western media have shifted away from blame and hysteria to an increasingly routinised reporting of HIV as a health story and social justice issue. But recent years have seen the emergence of a new media story in many Western countries; the criminal prosecution for HIV-related offences, and with it a reframing of old discourses of ‘innocence’ and ‘guilt’, but now with heterosexuals in focus. We examine this story in recent domestic media coverage in Australia, a country where heterosexual HIV transmission is rare by global comparison. Echoing similar stories in other Western media, in Australian coverage the idea of criminal intent converges with the symbolic weight of black sexuality and African origins to produce a ‘monstrous’ masculinity, which at the local level taps into contemporary racial tensions and, in so doing, conjures an imagined Anglo-heterosexuality at once vulnerable to and safe from HIV in a globalised epidemic and world.

Keywords: HIV, heterosexuality, media, criminal prosecutions, race

Introduction
In the early HIV epidemic, Western media provided a key site for the cultural production of HIV/AIDS as a disease of the ‘other’, making possible the idea that infection was linked to identities located outside the ‘mainstream’; outside ‘proper’ heterosexuality. As has been extensively documented and analysed, media coverage in the 1980s and 1990s was marked by the demonisation of gay men, drug users and other marginalised populations as culpable conduits of disease (Crimp 1992, Treichler 1999, Kitzinger 1993, 1995, Gilman 1988, Sontag 1990, Watney 1987, 1989), including in Australia (Lupton 1994, 1999, Aroni 1992). Less scrutinised, but in growing need of attention, is the way heterosexuality figures in the media today in the face of a changed global epidemic.

In the past decade, a different picture of the epidemic has emerged and the unrestrained blame and hysteria that defined early media discourses has subsided. There is now broad international recognition that HIV is transmitted through particular practices, not particular people. With increased knowledge, political activism, and a virus that has defied its initial imagined boundaries, HIV has become repositioned as a global crisis and as a
heterosexual epidemic. In addition, the introduction of new treatments in the mid-1990s, which led to a dramatic decline in AIDS-related mortality, has seen HIV widely reconceptualised as a manageable chronic illness in many Western countries (Rofes 1998, Siegel and Lekas 2002). Recent analyses show that over the past decade Western media have shifted to an increasingly routinised domestic reporting of HIV as a health and biomedical story. They also point to a general shift away from domestic coverage to the global epidemic, particularly to the escalating crisis in Africa (Cullen 2003, Brodie et al. 2004, Swain 2005, Bardhan 2001).

Recent years, however, have seen the emergence of a new domestic media story in several Western countries, namely the criminal prosecution for HIV transmission. And with it has come a revival and reframing of the old familiar discourse of ‘innocent victims’ and ‘guilty others’ so prevalent in early news reporting. But what distinguishes this contemporary story is that heterosexuality is now at the centre. In this paper, we examine this storyline in the context of recent HIV coverage by Australia’s largest broadsheet, *The Sydney Morning Herald.* This focus evolved from an initially broader interest in mainstream media coverage of HIV and heterosexuality in Australia where the HIV epidemic continues to be concentrated largely among gay men, while the incidence of heterosexual transmission remains low by global comparison (NCHECR 2005). Given this global-local difference, we were interested in how HIV is constituted as relevant or not to heterosexual audiences and how heterosexuality, in turn, is constituted through this process. Also, and most importantly, what happens when personalised stories of heterosexual HIV transmission receive attention by the media? We found that such stories tended to focus on criminal cases involving HIV-positive immigrant African men. Noting similar coverage in other Western media, we explore how these stories produce a ‘monstrous’ masculinity that performs a counterpoint to an imagined Anglo-heterosexuality at once vulnerable to and safe from HIV in a globalised epidemic and world.

**The criminalisation of HIV transmission**

In most Western countries, human rights approaches have become a fundamental feature of policy responses to HIV. Despite the success of this approach, there has been a recent trend towards a more punitive response to the epidemic (Dodds and Keogh 2006: 315, Lowbury and Kinghorn 2006). Criminal prosecutions for HIV-related offences, including transmission and non-disclosure of HIV status to a sexual partner, are on the rise, and the majority of cases are taking place in the West, particularly in English-speaking countries (Worth et al. 2005, Bernard 2005). Some countries charge under existing criminal laws, as in the UK (Dodds et al. 2005), while HIV-specific laws have been enacted in other parts of the West, including in several US states (Galletly and Pinkerton 2006). In Australia, some states rely on existing laws while others have developed specific laws to cover HIV transmission (Cameron 2007: 33).

Commentators have raised a number of concerns about the potential social and public health implications of the criminalisation of HIV transmission, which we recap towards the end of this paper. One such concern is that it evokes ‘an image of HIV-persons as always on the verge of engaging in criminal acts’ (Worth et al. 2005: 5), and undermines the public health emphasis on the mutual responsibility of both partners to prevent HIV infection (Galletly and Pinkerton 2006). In the ‘highly institutionalized and scripted domain of the court’, HIV becomes stripped of its relational and contextual complexities (Worth et al. 2005: 5). The law is based on a binary model of either/or, of active or passive, perpetrator
or victim, of people doing things or having things done to them. In this model, only one person is perceived as responsible, and it is through this model that lawyers and judges imagine the crime that HIV transmission represents (Weait 2001: 450). Likewise, with these criminal prosecutions, ‘victim’ has re-entered AIDS discourse, ‘this time in the guise of the innocent party duped into sex by a non-disclosing HIV-positive partner’ (Worth et al. 2005: 6).

It is perhaps this tight interpretive frame provided by the law that has seen much Western media coverage of these criminal cases return to the old sensationalised discourse of blame, with the UK tabloid media presenting a particularly stark example. Media analyses show that news covering criminal prosecutions in the UK are often lurid and inflammatory (del Amo et al. 2006). Monsterisation of the defendants is accomplished through unequivocal headlines such as ‘One-man HIV epidemic’ (Taggart 2004), ‘AIDS assassin’ (Perrie 2004), ‘Sexual predator’ (Watson 2004), ‘HIV beast’ (Editorial 2003a), and ‘HIV timebomb’ (Armstrong 2004). As Emma Bickerstaff (2007), Communications Manager at the UK National AIDS Trust, comments: ‘There [is] little or no attempt to convey the difficulties of disclosure of HIV status, or indeed ask why these prosecutions [have] only now begun after twenty years of the epidemic’ (2007: 7). The reporting of HIV-related offences in the Australian media archive that we examined is far less sensationalist and aggressive. Yet there are some common underlying themes.

Western media coverage of these cases is not indiscriminate, but rather zooms in on and feeds off markers of social difference. Who receives attention as an ‘AIDS criminal’ is influenced by culturally specific ideas of morality and by local prejudices and fears (Worth et al. 2005: 8–9). In a contemporary world where globalisation and transnational migration have given new fuel to ‘old habits of xenophobia and nationalism’ (Worth 2002: 66), it is not surprising that HIV-positive African men involved in HIV-related criminal cases have been especially ‘singled out for hostile stories’ in the UK (Bickerstaff 2007: 8), and also in Canada (Miller 2005), and in New Zealand (Worth 1995), while one of the most publicised cases in the US involved an African-American man (Shevory 2004). In the UK, although the majority of criminal prosecutions has involved white people (11 of 15 cases between 2001 and 2007), cases involving African men have received disproportionate attention by the media (Bernard 2007). In the news period we examined, a handful of cases were taking place in different Australian states. The only case that received coverage involved an African male immigrant, the first person sentenced for transmission of HIV in the state of New South Wales (which we discuss later), along with another HIV-related legal case involving an African man.

Another noteworthy feature of these cases is the over-representation of heterosexuals. To cite again the UK as an example, the cohort of people prosecuted for transmission of HIV there does not correspond to the national epidemiology of HIV, with only two defendants being men who have sex with men (James et al. 2007). Similarly, in Australia, where HIV is largely concentrated among gay men, the number of criminal cases is small, but most have involved heterosexual men (Cameron 2007: 36). In our Australian news archive, there were no reports of criminal cases involving gay men. The following comment on the UK situation is equally true in the Australian context: ‘people who have not been targeted with sexual health education or whose peer group has not been significantly affected by the HIV epidemic are more likely to be both complainants and defendants’ (James et al. 2007). Thus, these criminal cases articulate not only local prejudices and xenophobia, they also articulate heterosexuality and gender in certain ways. We argue that in local media coverage of such cases, gendered and racialised discourses conjure a particular kind of heterosexual masculinity that invites productive opportunities for othering and ways of making sense of HIV and heterosexuality in Australia today.
Background and approach

Australia remains an exception in the global epidemic in that a relatively small proportion (18%) of new HIV diagnoses is attributed to heterosexual contact (NCHECR 2005). Since the start of the epidemic, the gay community has been disproportionately affected and this has shaped both official responses to the disease and public perceptions. HIV prevention and education strategies have been primarily targeted at gay men (Kippax and Race 2003), while HIV has become largely invisible in the heterosexual community and confined to the periphery of mainstream awareness as a problem of ‘others’ or ‘elsewhere’ (Persson et al. 2006).¹ There have been only two national HIV awareness campaigns aimed at the general public in the history of the Australian epidemic, and none since 1988 (Tulloch and Lupton 1997). Most HIV information today is disseminated via AIDS organisations and via community-based media. Since these publications are primarily directed to gay men and distributed through gay networks (for example, as inserts in gay newspapers), there is little cross-over with media environments more readily accessed by the broader population. This suggests the importance of gaining insight into mainstream media reporting on HIV, as it is likely to be the major or even only source of HIV information for heterosexuals (see Timmins et al. 1998: 182).

Media analysts have long debated how and to what extent the news media influence how people think. It cannot be assumed that the media have a direct, unmitigated impact on public perceptions or that media messages are passively internalised. How audiences negotiate and respond to media is mediated by socioeconomic position and cultural experience, making any media text ‘polysemic’ or open to multiple readings (Kitzinger 1998a, 1998b, Aroni 1992, Timmins et al. 1998). Still, many researchers agree that the mainstream media play a critical role in shaping public perceptions of HIV (Nelkin 1991, Lupton 1999, Rogers et al. 1991, Swain 2005). Not only do news media provide an arena for the circulation of information about HIV, but in so doing they provide semiotic frames that encourage or discourage certain ways of making sense of the illness (Aroni 1992: 127). Like all news, coverage of HIV is deeply coded by historical discourses of disease, sexuality and population groups. As such, it reveals core cultural values and ideologies (Lupton 1993, Kitzinger 1998a).

The research

Given the particular context of HIV in Australia, our initial aim was to explore how and to what extent heterosexuality figured in contemporary HIV news. To this end, we examined articles appearing in The Sydney Morning Herald between 2000 and 2005, a time period that has thus far received less attention from media analysts and HIV researchers. This newspaper was chosen for several reasons: first, because it is a longstanding and generally respected broadsheet with a reputation for journalistic independence and reasoned debate; secondly, because it has the highest circulation among quality newspapers in Australia;² and thirdly, because it is easily accessible via the Factiva database, which provides an online repository of all published articles in the period of interest. In focusing on the one publication, our media archive is significantly smaller than that examined by earlier studies of Australian HIV media coverage (e.g. Lupton 1999). We acknowledge that an exploration of tabloid journalism and popular media could provide additional and valuable insights into contemporary discourses of HIV and heterosexuality, and indeed of criminal prosecutions. However, practical reasons required us to restrict the scope of our research to one journalism environment. In choosing a ‘relatively sober’ quality broadsheet as the site for our inquiry, we take our cue from Suzanne Fraser who suggests in her study of media...
representations of methadone that ‘there is a great deal to be learnt from the limits of some of Western liberal democracy’s most trusted reporting’ (2006: 674).

An archive of articles from The Sydney Morning Herald was compiled by searching Factiva with the keywords ‘HIV’ and ‘News and Features’. 130 domestic news stories were retrieved and downloaded to a local computer for analysis. The full text of each article was entered into an NVivo 7 database and a preliminary analysis was conducted to identify major topics. Following Australian responses to the global epidemic, the second most common topic was HIV risk practices, transmission and criminal cases, totalling 33 articles. These articles were specifically examined for public debates about mainstream fears, complacency and perceived risks of HIV transmission (Newman and Persson, forthcoming). Close attention was also paid to the featuring of heterosexuals, especially the discursive positioning of individual heterosexuals with HIV and those perceived to be at risk. In line with similar conceptual directions within cultural studies, the sociology of health and illness, and critical public health, our analysis draws on Foucault’s interpretation of discourse as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (1972: 49). That is, we write from a position that does not conceive heterosexual or HIV as a priori phenomena subsequently ‘represented’ by public discourses, such as the media, but rather as meaningfully constituted through such discourses.

Broader context of findings
While we pay specific attention to articles on criminal prosecution for HIV-related offences in this paper, it is important to place these stories in a broader context and to get a general sense of HIV coverage in Australia in relation to heterosexuality. Heterosexuality figured prominently in this news archive, including in news that focused on the Australian epidemic. Articles covering rising domestic HIV infection rates tended to emphasise HIV complacency and an increase in unprotected sex among both gay men and heterosexuals. At first glance, this discursive framing suggests a significant democratisation of HIV risk, breaking the HIV-homosexuality nexus. It suggests that HIV is no longer positioned as a disease of ‘depraved’ others, but as a human crisis that concerns us all and with the potential to affect anyone. Yet, a closer reading of these media narratives reveals how Australian heterosexuality, particularly of the Anglo variety, is persistently exempted from HIV risk through the production and policing of its own borders.

First, the presence of heterosexuals in reports of domestic infection rates is muddled by two contrasting messages: one decrying unsafe sex and complacency among heterosexuals; the other affirming that HIV transmission occurs primarily among gay men in Australia, with no inquiring connections made between the two that would give heterosexual readers any pause for thought (Whelan 2000a, 2000b). Likewise, calls for national safe sex campaigns (Horin 2005, Whelan 2000b) sit oddly next to stories in which rising heterosexual incidents of HIV are explained as not locally driven but rather as ‘imported’ by immigrant populations from high-prevalence countries (Humphries 2000, Whelan 2000b, Robinson 2001). Secondly, the most regular appearance of heterosexuals occurs in personalised stories of HIV. A significant approach by Western media coverage has been to communicate HIV issues through individual stories. Not only has this personalisation of HIV provided an effective recipe for gripping copy, it has also provided avenues for emotional identification or dis-identification, empathy or disapproval as individuals come to act as archetypes that stand for wider social meanings and concerns (Lupton 1999: 37–8, Rogers et al. 1991). This special attention to heterosexuals could be taken to signify that, in contrast to the often nameless, faceless gay men in domestic HIV news, heterosexuals affected by HIV matter and are deserving of sympathy. This is certainly true in stories about HIV-positive
heterosexual women. However, in stories about HIV-positive heterosexual men, quite a different scenario emerges.

**Innocent women and devious men**

In personalised stories featuring HIV-positive heterosexuals, men and women are given distinct subject positions. The women are invariably portrayed as innocent victims of men's betrayal. They are reported to have been infected by cheating or deceitful male partners, whom they had mistakenly trusted. Their stories are conveyed with empathy and respect, and the women's own voices are often included (e.g. Halliday 2005). In contrast, the HIV-positive men are typically presented in a negative way, as violent (Editorial 2004), vindictive (Pedersen 2004), despicable and selfish (Lamont 2003a), a threat to public safety (Butcher and Delaney 2003), and as predatory wreckers of women's lives (Wallace 2005). The men's experiences are left unexplored, consolidating their position as guilty culprits. Their actions and characters are construed solely through the voices of their victims, legal representatives and the police. Only one article in the whole media archive gives voice to an HIV-positive heterosexual man. He is quoted as saying: 'I want to kill people' (Pedersen 2004).

Two local news stories carrying these themes of the deceitful man and the betrayed woman received particular attention during the time period we examined. Both stories involved legal cases relating to HIV and their development is tracked over time. In the first story, a Sydney woman is reported to have had her husband’s HIV status concealed from her not only by him but also by their shared doctors. Prior to their marriage, the couple visited a medical practice for sexual health tests. The woman’s HIV test came back negative. But her fiancé, born in Ghana, tested positive for HIV. He is alleged to have forged his laboratory results, deceiving her that he too was HIV-negative. She subsequently contracts HIV and sues the couple’s doctors for negligence and breach of contract after failing to inform her of her husband’s HIV status (Lamont 2003b). A second article reports that the woman’s legal challenge was successful and that she has been awarded $727,000. The woman's experience is given voice by her lawyer and by the presiding court judge who details the devastating effects of HIV on her life as a result of her husband’s ‘despicable conduct’ (Lamont 2003a). In a third article, the husband is reported to have fled the country, escaping ‘punishment for his deceit’ (Editorial 2003b).

The second story involves the criminal case against a married man who, after having brief sexual relationships with two women, is charged with ‘knowingly infecting them with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS’. Police allege that the man, a Congolese immigrant, had unprotected sex with the women, described as tourists from Germany and Ireland, without telling them he was HIV-positive (Kennedy 2004a). A second article reports that the man, now named as Stanislas Kanengele-Yondjo, is denied bail by a Sydney magistrate ‘for the protection of the community’ because ‘the risk was too great that he might infect even one more woman’ (Kennedy 2004b). The following year, charges of ‘maliciously inflicting grievous bodily disease’ against Kanengele-Yondjo are dropped due to difficulties of proving intent. He is allowed to plead guilty to the lesser offence of ‘maliciously inflicting grievous bodily harm’ (Wallace 2005). An editorial questions ‘why offences involving the conscious spread of HIV should require intent on the part of the offender’, and calls are made for the law ‘to be swiftly amended’ (Editorial 2005). Kanengele-Yondjo is jailed for at least nine years for his ‘heinous crimes’, becoming the first person in NSW to be sentenced for ‘passing on HIV’. Handing down the sentence, the acting district court judge Warrick Andrew said: ‘To have subjected innocent persons to your own horrors demonstrates a
poverty of spirit and a moral bankruptcy that beggars belief’. Detective Bernadette Ingram also comments: [The victims] appreciate that at least for the next nine or 12 years the offender won’t have an opportunity to hurt anyone like this again’ (Jacobsen 2005).

The portrayals of the HIV-positive heterosexual men in these news stories appear to upend the argument put forward by several social researchers that heterosexual men have been noticeably absent from public discourses and media representations of HIV in Australia (Waldby 1996, Lupton 1996; for a British comparison see Wilton 1997, Richardson 1996). Waldby, for example, has argued, ‘heterosexual men’ is the sexual category which has remained largely unmarked by a ‘risk’ status within the epidemic’ (Waldby 1996: 9). Unlike gay men and heterosexual women who have ‘been made to bear the burden of an infected sexual identity’, heterosexual men have been allowed to maintain an (imaginary) position as clean and safe, never vulnerable to infection, never infectious to others (Waldby 1996: 10–13). Vitellone (2002) has critiqued this notion of heterosexual masculinity as ‘invisible’ and ‘off-stage’ by arguing that heterosexual male identity does not pre-exist public HIV discourses, but is performatively produced through them. We agree with this reading in that different heterosexual masculinities can be seen as constituted in these Australian news stories, rather than as absent from them. On the other hand, as we will argue, these stories also work to dissociate HIV from an imagined normative (Anglo) heterosexual masculinity, a perspective that coincides with that of Waldby.

**Monstrous masculinity**

In the news stories cited above, a normative heterosexual masculinity is produced through its differentiation from a masculine ‘other’. As feminist writers argue, the cultural formation of gender identity emerges out of negation. Heterosexuality is defined by what it is not, by what it rejects. Inherently unstable and fragile, it depends on the repudiation of other identities for its own security and coherence (Butler 1997, Halley 1993). In these stories, the figure of the African heterosexual man spreading HIV to (white) women through deception comes to stand for a monstrous masculinity that is other to an imagined Australian heterosexuality, rendered both vulnerable to and safe from HIV by its presence. The ‘monstrous’, Shildrick (1996) states, ‘is the other who must be excluded in order to secure the boundaries of the same, the other who is recognizable by the lack of resemblance’ (1996: 2). As such, it is the ‘the embodiment of that which is exiled from the self’ (Star 1991: 54). But, as Derrida has shown, exclusion is never complete. ‘At the very moment of definition, the subject is marked by its excluded other, the absent presence which primary identification must deny and on which it relies. The monster is always within’ (Shildrick 1996: 6). Here, the African male protagonists can be seen to both disrupt and secure the boundaries of ‘the proper’. They expose the vulnerabilities of heterosexuality; the ambiguities and perils of sexual interactions, the violence that lurks within its gender power asymmetry. And, at the same time, identification is refused through radical otherness, through monsterisation.

This monsterisation is accomplished in several ways. First, the emphasis on deception in these stories clearly designates the men’s actions as being transgressive of Western norms of heterosexuality and its putative virtues of trust and fidelity. Of course, the men’s resistance to condom use is in many ways archetypically masculine. It is locatable within a heterosexual ideology that essentialises and prioritises an uncontrollable male sexuality over safety, in particular safe sex technologies perceived to constrain or compromise male sexual pleasure (Wilton and Aggleton 1991, Holland et al. 1998). In this sense, the men are not necessarily behaving any differently from a notional heterosexual man. But it is not this
ideology that is of concern in these stories. On the contrary, the men’s ruthless pursuit of condom-less sex is amplified to such extreme proportions, and with such ruinous consequences, that it comes to perform a monstrous other to a ‘civilised’ masculinity that preserves heterosexuality.4 There is no doubt that the men’s behaviour is problematic. The point is that its public display works to consign HIV to some imagined heterosexual outpost and thus shore up the boundaries of ‘the proper’, absolving the category of heterosexuality from being considered as either vulnerable to HIV or potentially infectious. Although unprotected sex is mentioned as the mode of transmission in these stories, the focus is decisively on deception and criminal excess, which condense into character flaws as the subjectivities of these men are left unexplored, including cultural beliefs about disease and transmission. The effect is a familiar one: identity, not practice, is implicated as the conduit of disease. Heterosexual transmission of HIV in Australia thus becomes associated with a particular kind of person, a monstrous other.

Importantly, the bodies of the men in these stories add fuel to their monsterisation. African origins and black skin mark them as being outside the Australian norm. In turn, their outsider status invokes HIV as a problem intrinsic to other continents, other bodies. The media outing of these men reinforces the idea that it is through these foreign bodies that HIV is ‘imported’ (Humphries 2000, Whelan 2000b) into an otherwise supposedly disease-free heterosexual Anglo-Australian community. This idea was recently seized upon by former independent MP Pauline Hanson who, in an attempted political comeback, called for ‘diseased Africans’ to be banned from immigration to Australia. Tapping into simmering racial tensions, Hanson argued: ‘We’re bringing in people from South Africa at the moment, there’s a huge amount coming into Australia, who have diseases, they’ve got AIDS . . . what my main concern is, is the diseases that they’re bringing in and yet no-one is saying or doing anything about it’ (AAP 2006). The call was soon echoed by the conservative Howard Government (AAP 2007), which effectively played the race card and mainstreamed many of Hanson’s populist policies while in power (1996 to 2007), with a marked escalation in the aftermath of 9/11. Facing electoral defeat in late 2001, the Howard Government successfully exploited community fears by launching into an attack on refugees, multiculturalism and Aboriginal land rights, quickly followed by participation in the US-led war on terror, ‘with all the ethnic targeting and demonising propaganda that it entailed’ (Poynting 2006: 89).

Such political mobilisations of ‘stranger-danger’, and the media attention given to men such as Kanengele-Yondjo, confine HIV to clearly marked bodies, diverting sexual responsibility and risk away from heterosexual Anglo-Australians. Monsterisation is intensified as media coverage taps into the mythical hypersexuality of Black men. Quotes reproduced from a legal statement written by one of the women infected by Kanengele-Yondjo signal his excessive, sinister sexuality: ‘He told me a long story about why there was no need to be worried [about HIV]. In the end he put me under so much pressure, twisted my head until he got what he wanted, to have unprotected intercourse’ (Jacobsen 2005). The second woman in the case similarly recounted his scheming tales: ‘I would never do anything to hurt you. I don’t have anything’ (Wallace 2005). The magistrate’s instruction to Kanengele-Yondjo is also quoted: ‘To ensure that you do not re-offend, and my concern is that there is a likelihood of that with dire consequences for the victim, I intend to bail refuse you [sic] for the protection of the community’ (Kennedy 2004b). Further invoking his uncontrollable sexuality, Kanengele-Yondjo’s diagnosing doctor is reported to have given him ‘more information and more explicit direction than any other patient’ (Jacobsen 2005).

There are echoes here of the much-publicised case of Charles Ssenyonga, a Ugandan immigrant who became Canada’s most notorious AIDS criminal in the late 1990s. Charged

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with having deliberately infected several women, he was portrayed in the media as a ‘sex-crazed Black man bent on dragging White women . . . down into the inferno of African AIDS’ (Miller 2005: 45). Similar themes are found in media coverage of other HIV-related criminal cases involving Black men, such as Nushawn Williams in the US (Shevory 2004), Peter Mwai in New Zealand (Worth 1995), and Mohammed Dica (Hagan 2003) and Feston Konzani (Perrie 2004) in the UK. In the Kanengele-Yondjo case, a racialised sexuality, invoked through references to predatory excess, becomes the engine of HIV transmission. In their role as victims, the women in this case are positioned as being powerless against the lethal sexuality of this AIDS criminal, denied any agency in sexual decision-making. While this positioning also makes use of common gender stereotypes, they are left unexamined and unchallenged as perpetrator and victim are severed from any consideration of the cultural institutionalisation of gender inequality and instead are imagined within the confines of a criminal case infused with racial overtones. In this way, as Raimondo suggests, the risk of HIV is not attached to the category of heterosexuality itself but rather to particular perverse heterosexualities (2005: 61).

This disengagement of HIV from heterosexuality more broadly is further reinforced in these criminal cases by the unequivocal differentiation between infectious body and infected body and by the men’s totalised positioning as the infector. There is little reflection on how the men themselves became infected, other than passing references to year of diagnosis, as if HIV is a self-generating, autonomic part of the AIDS criminal’s being (or indeed of African bodies). As James Miller (2005) writes, ‘as the villain he must bear the semiotic burden’ of being ‘the infectious origin in its clearly isolated case, not a mere link in an indefinite chain of transmission’ (2005: 47). It is an imagining that is likely to have some purchase in a country where heterosexual transmission of HIV is relatively rare and the perception of risk among heterosexuals is low. Indeed, the women in the Kanengele-Yondjo case are presented as victims of monstrous circumstances, victims whose misfortunes are sensational and unique enough to be newsworthy. This foregrounding of the exceptional in this and other media stories of criminal cases involving heterosexuals effectively consigns HIV to some place other than heterosexual true love. For, it is sexual deception and sexual otherness that animates this storyline, not the cultural prevalence of unprotected sex among heterosexuals in Australia and the entrenched gender relations that sustain it.

Discussion

In examining these Australian media stories, we asked how heterosexuality is constituted in relation to HIV, given that HIV is now widely recognised as a global heterosexual epidemic. Significantly, in a country with such a low incidence of heterosexual transmission of HIV, who receives attention and how? What discourses are brought into play and with what effect? At first glance, HIV reporting in this news archive appeared balanced and reasoned in tone. The marked presence of heterosexuals suggested a widening of perceived vulnerability to HIV and vigilance against complacency among all population groups. But, as we discuss elsewhere (Newman and Persson forthcoming), discourses of risk were unclear as to precisely who was being asked to consider HIV as a matter of personal concern. And, as shown here, a persistent othering of heterosexuals with HIV appeared to invite a ‘fantasy of containment’ (Raimondo 2005: 54) and of an Anglo-Australian heterosexuality largely protected from HIV and thus absorbed from critical sexual introspection.

In domestic news, this othering turned on primarily HIV-positive heterosexual men. Previous divisions along sexual lines between culpable homosexuals and innocent heterosexuals were
absent from this archive. Yet ‘the old binary refused to buckle’, as Miller puts it (2005: 32), with the cast of ‘guilty’ and ‘innocent’ actors simply shifting to ‘new discursive grounds’. This binary model was played out in several news stories with heterosexual women as the archetypal victim and deceitful heterosexual men as perpetrators. It was particularly evident in two local stories focusing on HIV-related offences in which the binary model of the law provided the discursive ground for assigning innocence and guilt. In these stories, criminality converged with the cultural imaginary of predatory black sexuality and the infectiousness of African bodies to evoke a monstrous masculinity. The production of this monstrous masculinity both taps into and reinforces wider tensions around nation, migration and race in today’s Australia, whilst effectively displacing HIV risk from everyday realms of heterosexual gender relations and sexual practice. As it performatively constitutes a perverse, ‘other’ heterosexuality, the monstrous contributes to the imperative for an enforced containment of sexual behaviour and disease through criminalisation.

Commentators have warned that the rising criminalisation of HIV transmission and of non-disclosure to sexual partners has a number of significant social, clinical and public health implications. Criminalisation, and the monsterisation that it tends to provoke in the media, is likely to exacerbate the stigma already associated with HIV (Dodds and Keogh 2006: 316–317) and create fear and paranoia among those who are infected (Bernard 2007). The threat of criminal prosecution may actually deter disclosure to sexual partners, it may deter people from being tested for HIV, and it may negatively affect trust and honesty between patients and service providers (Lowbury and Kinghorn 2006, Tan 1999, Power 2007, Weait 2001). A key concern is that criminalisation contradicts the public health message that both partners are responsible for sexual health. Prosecutions may well create a false sense of security that the law, rather than safe sex, will protect people from HIV (Tan 1999, Galletly and Pinkerton 2006, Worth et al. 2005, Bernard 2007). With their over-representation in criminal cases, heterosexuals may be especially susceptible in this respect. In Australia, at least, the ‘mutual responsibility model’ does not necessarily apply outside gay communities given heterosexual gender inequality and a lower perceived risk of HIV transmission (Cameron 2007: 36).

Future research would usefully monitor and explore the coverage of criminal prosecutions in a range of contemporary media, including two recent Australian cases involving African immigrants (Roberts 2007, Anderson 2007). For populations not targeted by HIV prevention and education campaigns, the mainstream media are likely to be a significant source of information about HIV. If these media give heterosexual (or other) audiences little reason to perceive HIV as having any relevance to their sexual practices, this has clear implications for the capacity of HIV prevention in Australia (and elsewhere) to respond to changing dynamics in the epidemic. In the media that we examined, this heterosexual disengagement from HIV was not simply a product of Australian epidemiological facts, but rather enabled by othering more generally and by specific monsterisation of defendants in isolated and dramatised cases of heterosexual transmission. Despite broad international recognition that HIV infection is associated with particular kinds of practices rather than with particular kinds of people, our research suggests that identity is still foregrounded in mainstream media and that, in the face of a changing global world, otherness clings to HIV like a comforting shield.

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Notes

1 HIV is not woven into language, relationships and sexuality among heterosexual Australians in the way it tends to be among gay men. There is no culture of regular HIV testing, which enables early diagnosis. As a result, heterosexuals constitute a substantial proportion of late presenters with an AIDS diagnosis (McDonald et al. 2003).

2 The Sydney Morning Herald was first published in 1831 and is currently published by Fairfax. At the end of 2005, weekday circulation was estimated at 211,337 with a readership of 854,000. The larger Saturday edition has a circulation of 353,852 and readership of 1,200,000 (herald ad centre 2006).

3 The image of the AIDS criminal who knowingly spreads HIV through deception reaches mythical proportions in this international story of a ‘one-legged German’ suspected of deliberately infecting more than 400 young Thai women with HIV. The man is reported to be held in jail, ‘accused of embarking on a vindictive rampage since he tested positive in 2001’ (Pedersen 2004).

4 Other high profile Australian news stories about masculine sexuality in recent years have also tended towards this monsterisation, particularly stories about the rape of Anglo-Australian young women by ‘Lebanese gangs’ and ‘animal-like’ professional rugby players (Moller 2004).

5 Only one article breaks with the general tendency to elide the question of heterosexual male infection and, in so doing, opens up a revealing space for interpretation. In a domestic story about IVF treatment for heterosexual couples affected by HIV, the following observation is made: ‘Of the nine men from the couples at the Royal Women’s Hospital, five acquired the virus through homosexual activity and four from the use of contaminated blood products’ (Davies and Noonan 2001). This ‘curiosity’ statement, which is completely irrelevant to the story, works to cast doubts on some HIV-positive men’s heterosexuality and on heterosexual sex as a route of transmission. Thus, in this archive, the source of heterosexual men’s infection is left unsaid, unless to suggest that heterosexual sex is not the source.

References


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