

## Review Article

### *Homophobic Violence*

(eds) Gail Mason and Stephen Tomens, (Hawkins Press, Sydney 1997)

Andrew Sharpe\*

This book integrates, in digestible form, theoretical and empirical work on the subject of homophobic violence. It highlights the pervasiveness of violence against lesbians and gays in Australian society. While physical and verbal violence are important in the analyses of the book's contributors, the linking theme is one which highlights homophobia or heterosexism. It is the textual violence whereby heterosexuality is privileged and homosexual desire, identity and lifestyle are denigrated that the contributors, in different contexts, seek to render visible.

The book includes chapters on the differential impact of violence on young people, on gay men and on lesbians; on police responses to this violence in South Australia and New South Wales; on the constructed deviant status of homosexual homicide victims; on criminology's description of lesbians and gay men as deviants marked out from heterosexuals; on HIV-related violence and its impact on victims; and a detailed analysis of the relevant law throughout Australia.

In her chapter Carole Ruthchild emphasises the interconnections between gender and sexuality with regard to specific instances of homophobic (heterosexed) violence. Thus she problematises readings of violence against lesbians which reduce the phenomenon to gender or sexuality alone.

Gail Mason addresses the problem of "naming". The violence of heterosexism often names individuals as lesbian or gay irrespective of whether they choose to come out of the closet. In this way control over visibility and public identity is wrestled from individuals. She points out that heterosexism only renders homosexuality visible, through naming, in derogatory terms. Crucially, heterosexism is seen to be sustained, as Judith Butler would argue, by derogatory repetition, or citation; of sexual otherness.<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Tomens focuses upon the failure of the discipline of criminology's to research adequately the way in which persons whom the discipline has constituted as 'deviant'

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1 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge (1993).

are themselves the subject of violence. This criticism extends across the terrain of criminology and includes and implicates various brands of academic criminology on the left including Marxism and Left Realism. While recognising the utility of identity based on politics as a law reform strategy aimed at reducing homophobic violence, Tomsen recognises that such a strategy reproduces rather than challenges the hetero-homo binary which underscores the violence sought to be overcome.

Allen George illustrates how the discourses of guilt and innocence are reversed in the context of the murder trials in which victims are gay (?) men. He focuses upon the way in which, in two New South Wales trials, the various actors in the trial process construct the victims' sexual identity. While the accused are scripted as "prey" the victims emerge as "predators". In particular the victims' sexualities are characterised as 'dangerous', as different from and in opposition to the "normalised" gay who neatly fits a stereotyped construction of a gay identity.<sup>2</sup> In this regard victims are doubly stigmatised in that they are marked both as gay and as outside of a normalised gay identity. This theme of double stigmatisation also emerges in the chapter by Rick Sarre and Stephen Tomsen addressing the link between homophobic violence and representations of HIV/AIDS as a "gay disease".

One criticism I have is the way in which the contributors either ignore (erase) or pay only cursory attention to violence, including textual violence, against transsexual/transgender victims, violence in which some lesbians and gays are perhaps implicated. More considered analyses of transsexual/transgender victims might have enriched some of the contributions. For example, Carole Ruthchild's focus upon the interconnection of sexuality and gender in scenarios of violence might have benefited in this regard.

In conclusion, the book is the first to explore in the Australian context the topic of homophobic violence. This subject is certainly in need of urgent articulation and aggressive readings and the book's contributors are to be commended for giving it increased visibility. The book is likely to be of interest to undergraduate and postgraduate audiences across a range of academic disciplines including, law, sociology, criminology and cultural studies. ●

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2 David Fraser, "Father knows best: transgressive sexualities and the rule of law" (1995) 7 (1) *Current Issues of Criminal Justice*, 82-7.