

# Introduction to Alan Brotherton’s “‘The Circumstances in Which They Come’’: Refiguring the Boundaries of HIV in Australia’

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**A**LAN BROTHERTON (1963-2015) WAS AN AUSTRALIAN HIV EDUCATOR AND community activist who played a leading role in establishing and shaping community and policy responses to HIV/AIDS in Australia and internationally. He joined the HIV sector in the early 1990s, first as a community outreach worker for the AIDS Council of New South Wales (ACON), before going on to hold significant leadership roles in several AIDS organisations. Alan was instrumental in the establishment of the peer-based organisations Positive Life NSW and the National Association of People With HIV Australia (NAPWHA), serving as the president of NAPWHA in the late 1990s, and contributing significantly to the development and implementation of several of Australia’s National HIV Strategies from the mid-1990s. In 2008 he joined the International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Brighton, England, where he facilitated community-strengthening programs in numerous countries, before moving to the role of Director of Policy and Communication for the International AIDS Society.

Alan returned home in 2010 to serve as Director of Community Services at ACON. He was diagnosed with a brain tumour in 2012. He continued work in the sector until his death in June 2015, survived by his partner of 15 years, Luke Cutler, his parents, brother and many friends and colleagues around the world who have been inspired by his energy and work. As an openly gay man who lived

with HIV for 30 years, Alan drew on his situation to play a major role in devising and implementing policies and programs that responded pragmatically, sensitively and creatively to the presence of HIV within bodies, communities and societies around the world. Within the HIV/AIDS sector he was known as a highly professional, efficient and sensitive manager. This managerial proficiency was accompanied by an extraordinarily sharp intellect, generous inquisitiveness, and endless fascination with people, cultures and social dynamics. As Nicolas Parkhill, Executive Director of ACON put it, if Alan 'hadn't been a community advocate he would have made a good anthropologist'.

Foucault coined the term 'specific intellectual' to refer to thinkers whose interventions in circumscribed domains of a 'real, material, everyday' nature have 'global effects', making a difference in wider scientific, social and political terrains (Foucault)—and this is how we have come to regard Alan's contribution. With its complex and specialised forms of knowledge and expertise, the HIV/AIDS sector stands as a striking example of one of the demarcated domains of social activity that Foucault argued constitutes modern societies. From its origins in grassroots politics, the Australian response to HIV/AIDS evolved into a distinct sphere of governance, replete with its own administrative categories, sources of authority and representative structures (Ariss). The epidemic was carved up into distinct domains, organised around specific 'affected communities'—gay men, sex workers, and people who inject drugs—conceived as discrete subpopulations with their own memberships, predispositions, social dynamics and spokespeople. This enabled what Rose and Miller call 'governing at a distance', a defining characteristic of neoliberal politics (Rose and Miller; Ballard). But the identification of discrete administrative categories and identities takes on particular significance in the context of threats to public health. As Robert Crawford has discussed, AIDS dramatically revealed how health can operate as both an identity strategy and a dividing practice. 'Controlling a danger and policing a boundary are often one and the same' (Crawford 403). The ascription of risk to bounded 'communities' has historically served to protect the self-conception of the 'general public' in Australia and many other countries

'The circumstances in which they come' is an essay Alan wrote while undertaking a Masters degree in Public Health in 2007. It analyses the political handling of a spate of new HIV infections over 2007, revealing how state and federal politicians deflected public anxieties and shifted responsibility for these infections by opportunistically and cynically converting them into investments in tighter border control. Border control has of course been a defining trope of Australian politics since Prime Minister John Howard's assertion in the wake of 9/11, the Tampa and Children Overboard Affairs of 2001: 'We will decide who comes to this country, and the circumstances in which they come'. But Australia's

efforts to stem HIV had rarely invoked immigration and border tropes before the events this essay relates, perhaps because of the epidemic's historical appearance among gay male citizens and residents in this country. Indeed, with 80 percent of HIV infections occurring among gay and other men who have sex with men, Australia's success in 'containing' the epidemic is frequently celebrated. Since the epidemic's peak in the early 1990s, the borders of sexual identity have appeared sufficiently stable in the epidemiological and public imagination to offset any widespread anxiety about other varieties of illicit border crossing. By the turn of the millennium, the administrative categories of HIV had been so firmly established in the response to the epidemic, that the events Brotherton discusses in this essay scarcely registered in HIV sector discourse.

Today, questions of immigration, asylum and border are deeply etched in the national imaginary: Both major political parties—the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Liberal-National Coalition—have presided over sustained human rights abuses in offshore detention camps, apparently to dissuade people from seeking asylum in Australia. The passport control queues of our international airports have been rebranded with 'Australian Border Force' ribbons that evoke reality TV shows celebrating the 'heroic' escapades of military police in Australia's immigration zones and territorial waters. In 2015, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott authorised Operation Fortitude, a blitz on downtown Melbourne that would have seen random on-the-spot visa status checks conducted alongside measures targeting 'anti-social behaviour', such as the use of sniffer dogs and random breath testing. This operation would have represented an unprecedented convergence of public health, public order and immigration technologies deployed to govern urban space, had it not been derailed by a rapidly mobilised flash-mob protest.

The governmental division of social life into discrete administrative categories is typically accompanied by the development of distinct domains of specialisation, and this is certainly true of the HIV/AIDS sector. This in turn effects the scope and framing of responses to risk, the thinking and activities it becomes possible to undertake, the way things come to matter. In saying this, we do not wish to downplay the heterogeneity of skills and expertise required of practitioners within any one domain. Over the course of his career, for example, Alan undertook activities as diverse as establishing rapport and conducting peer education with non-gay identifying men who were looking for sex in public parks; navigating the complex administrative protocols of the Therapeutic Goods Administration to ensure people with HIV/AIDS could access drugs through compassionate access schemes; engaging critically with medical and social researchers; overseeing the work of community-based clinicians, educators, support workers, managing budgets, dealing with bureaucrats, etc. But, with its

careful attention to the displacements that can occur in the government of risk, this essay demonstrates Alan's capacity to think across and against the administrative categories that organise the HIV sector. Given the increasing significance of logics of border control in Australian governmental discourse, the essay stands as a fascinating—and remarkably prescient—study of how governments handle and exploit the volatile symbolics of infection and containment.

Some months before his death Alan expressed a wish to develop this paper for publication. In preparing the piece for this journal, we changed very little beyond minor proofing and editing. We would like to thank Alan's partner, Luke Cutler, and the editor of *Australian Humanities Review*, for helping in this process—we are happy to see this work reach a wider public.

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