

have, and those rough edges can endear us to them even more. The wild goose chase in this mystery shifts the reader from looking for the real perpetrator to looking for an honest plot.

*When the Corpse Lies* is a good effort gone wrong.

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## Taking Names

Reviewed by **Benjamin Shepard**

### Notorious H.I.V.: The Media Spectacle of Nushawn Williams

By Thomas Shevory

University of Minnesota Press

ISBN 0-8166-4340-7

PB, \$18.95, 214 pp.

If social policy in the United States could be thought of as a narrative, over the last decade plot lines have shifted focus toward criminalization rather than prevention of social problems. We have “three strikes” laws, get tough policies, militarized police and more people of color in jail than college in New York State. Within this context, Thomas Shevory, a professor of politics at Ithaca College in upstate New York, has set his eyes on the social, legal and economic dimensions of this paradigmatic shift. He does so with a case study of a particularly telling media frenzy involving an African-American male named Nushawn Williams.

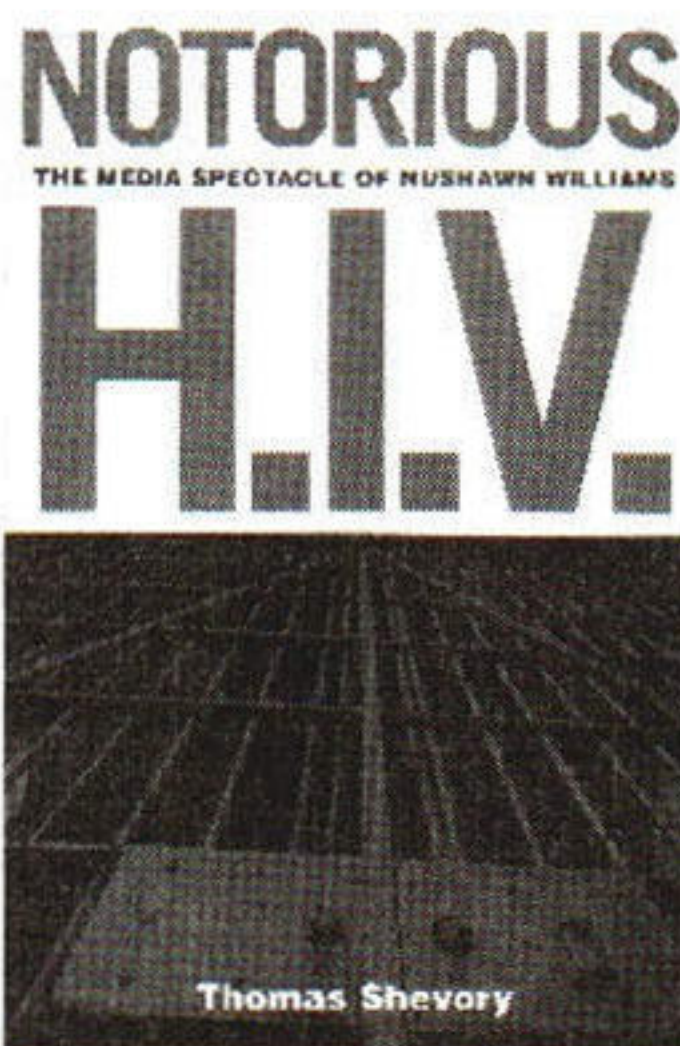
“On October 27, 1997, legal history was made in New York State,” the author explains in the first lines of the work. “For the first time, an exception to the state’s HIV confidentiality law was invoked so as to allow public identification of a person believed to be knowingly transmitting the virus to his sex partners.” Twenty-year-old Nushawn Williams was then identified, his HIV status divulged in the press conference. Williams, a product of Brooklyn public schools where frank, engaging or effective HIV education has been handicapped by a politically determined right fixed with the idea of abstinence-only sex education, was then charged and convicted of reckless endangerment and statutory rape charges for having sex with underage women and knowingly spreading HIV/AIDS. For much of the decade, the ACT UP New York Youth Education Life Line (YELL) had fought to increase the HIV education in New York public schools in order to prevent just what was happening to Williams. While activists fought to push policymakers to build opportunities, not jails, progress was often meager.

Using the framework of moral panic first outlined by British sociologists Stuart Cohen and Stuart Hall, Shevory assesses the exaggerations, hyperbole and demonization that surrounded the

Williams case. The work’s thesis accurately suggests that Williams’ portrayal as an “AIDS monster” served political purposes. A constant media flow of images of Williams as an out-of-control African-American sexual predator who preyed on innocent white women was followed by the passage of HIV-transmission statutes across the country. The *To Kill a Mockingbird* plot line of the Williams case became particularly useful for the panic script; there was a need for a villain to protect the innocent public from. After all, when Darnell McGee, another African-American male, exposed a number of black women to HIV during the same period, the news failed to create any of the same sensation. Yet the ramifications of the Williams case included criminalization of a public health problem, previously considered within the providence of prevention and education. Shevory explains: “On June 18, 1998, in the final flurry of the last day of the legislative session, the New York State Legislature passed a major revision to the state’s public health law. This revision requires physicians and laboratories in the state to notify public health officials whenever a person tests positive for HIV. It also authorizes local health officials to notify those persons who might be at risk of contracting HIV from those who have tested positive.” Shevory rightly points out, “A good argument can be made that the Williams case and the media’s attention to it were crucial to the passage of this legislation.”

The policy was referred to as Names Reporting. Activists throughout New York fought the passage of the law and its symbolic shift from the assumption that AIDS was an exceptional case that needed to be treated in a fashion that protected civil liberties. Further, New York, as the state with the largest caseload of people with HIV/AIDS in the nation, was viewed as a trendsetter. Florida followed suit, with state legislators even citing the Williams case as reason to revise the Florida criminal code to make knowing transmission of HIV a class I felony with prison time. The ugly irony, of course, is that Williams was charged with reckless endangerment after he clearly followed state health protocols and provided the state department of health with the names of those with whom he had been in contact. This was not an encouraging outcome for those working in AIDS service organizations, charged with implementing the dazzlingly untenable Names Reporting law.

Like the best traditional ethnography, the early chapters of Shevory’s work reads like a compelling novel; the legal analysis of the final chapters successfully demonstrates the author’s core argument that the media frenzy around the case dehumanized Williams in a manner which compromised core elements of the criminal justice and penal system. And what of the public health implications? As I write this review, *The New York Times* reports a link between HIV in prison, high rates of incarceration of African Americans, and increasing HIV rates among African Americans outside of prison. Without effective prevention, rates of HIV will only increase, regardless of how many prisons get funded.



**Benjamin Shepard** is co-editor of *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (Verso, 2002).