2

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN SEXUALITIES EXPLORED THROUGH THE LENS OF SEX WORK

Corrinne Sullivan

Introduction

The concept of Indigenous sexuality often produces an abundance of recirculated ideas and (mis)conceptions which, on interrogation, tend to show more about the minds that wrote them than they do about Indigenous Australians or Indigenous sexuality. Further, there may well be a connection between the type of narratives and the silences that occur in Indigenous, geographical and feminist scholarship, as intimated in this chapter. Representations of Indigenous sexuality, particularly Indigenous women’s sexuality, are usually linked to violence and exploitation. There is limited writing on pleasure, desire or enjoyment. My research with Indigenous Australian sex workers brings to light the limited perspectives presented in the academic literature that discusses Indigenous sexuality. Through my research, Indigenous male, female and transgender sex workers provide counter-narratives that are not solely reacting to colonial and/or cultural constructions of sexuality. Rather, these counter-narratives centre Indigenous Australian experiences, rendering colonial and cultural constructions as a process to be understood, not as the defining factor in the way in which Indigenous sexuality, gender diversity and identity is represented. As an Indigenous person from the Wiradjuri nation in central-western New South Wales, I draw on my experiences as both an Indigenous woman and as a sexual being to view, analyse and interpret the narratives and the literature.

Engaging with the lives of Aboriginal Australian sex workers propelled me back to the imperialist nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when hierarchies of race dominated public discourse. The conceptual terrain of historical works provides a familiar narrative of Indigenous people who suffered sexual exploitation and victimhood, and many such stories are produced and reproduced in academic literature (Langton 2008; Moreton-Robinson 1998; Ryan 2016) and, although sexual exploitation did and does occur in Indigenous communities, such positions are not taken from an Indigenous point of view, nor do they include counter-narratives to these assertions. Barker observes:
These representational practices suppress Indigenous epistemologies, histories, and cultural practices regarding gender and sexuality while also concealing the historical and social reality of patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia within Indigenous communities.  

Scholars may well be continuing these tracks of thought without question or interrogation. I argue that, in large measure, this blindness stems from the fact that, again and again, scholars of Indigenous histories and contemporalities sidestep an essential truth: as human beings, our sexuality as Indigenous people is central to our sense of self and our desires. Indigenous sexuality and gender diversity are often ignored, silenced or misunderstood in Indigenous, geographic and feminist scholarship (Brown 2012; Moreton-Robinson 2000, 2013; Sullivan 2018) and are rarely written from the point of view of Indigenous people. It is striking that questions of Indigenous sex, sexuality and gender are rarely evident in geographical, feminist and Indigenous literature, as such matters should be intertwined with the most central topics related to Indigenous being, such as identity, body and emotion, as well as the very nature of Indigenous people as social and cultural beings. Though scholars have had much to say about Indigenous ways of life, for the most part they have had little to say in regard to Indigenous sexuality.

One way to map Indigenous sexuality is to chronicle Indigenous peoples’ lives in sexual spaces. In this chapter, I engage with Indigenous Australian people in the sphere of sex work. The space of the body and its geographies of sexuality and gender are highlighted within the bounds of sex-work labour, economics and sexual autonomy. Such research on Indigenous Australians’ sexual relations aims to encourage new understandings of sex, sexuality and gender and to stimulate different ways of (re)imagining Indigenous bodies. This chapter is offered as an affirmation of Indigenous rights to self-determination, as well as a form of resistance against the misrepresentation of Indigenous sexualities and gender diversity. Indigenous sexuality is not just about having sex; it is about identity and self-determination (Barker 2017b). It is about gender, body and the expression of those two things.

The colonial hangover

This section provides an account of the dominant Australian historical discourses, finding that Indigenous people, in particular Indigenous women, were viewed as exotic, erotic and something to be desired, and yet simultaneously caused anxiety and were objects to be feared. Indigenous Australian people were described as savage, promiscuous and primitive (Moreton-Robinson 1998). In order for the colonizing male to maintain control, Indigenous Australian people’s disturbing and disruptive sexual energies had to be contained, and they became increasingly targeted in violent interventions and racialized legislation and policies. Assimilationist federal and state policies and legislation were central to a regime of sexual surveillance, and this control of supposedly degenerate sexuality became pivotal to the portrayal of Indigenous people. These anxieties and fears emerged from the moment of the invasion of Australia. A key feature of colonial anxiety was the fabrication of the sexualities of Indigenous people – a subject well documented by Indigenous feminist scholars (Barker 2017b; Langton 1993, 2008; Moreton-Robinson 1998, 2000; Sullivan 2018). Colonial discourses on Indigenous people’s sexuality led to the objectification and ensuing dehumanization of Indigenous people globally (Barker 2017b; Smith 2012). In Australia, Indigenous people were, and often continue to be, situated on the lowest rung of the class ladder, our social standing a critical factor underpinning social inequality, a social position closely linked to long-held beliefs regarding people of colour globally (McKittrick 2006; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Sullivan 2018).
Representations of Indigenous sexualities are shaped almost entirely by historically and colonially constituted narratives that determine/explain/describe the deepest intimacies of our lives at any given time and place. These narratives are socially constructed and are bounded legally, socially, culturally and sexually, trapping Indigenous sexuality within the imagination of predominantly White people, a position that is shaped and reinforced by history, racism and discrimination and that renders the nuances of particular people’s experiences invisible – actually, not invisible; rather silenced and unacknowledged. Indeed, racialized constructions of sexuality and bodies were essential to the rationale for invasion and colonization, fashioning Indigenous bodies as savage and primitive in order to justify and reinforce the imposition of Western superiority and civilization (Levine 2008). Moreover, the bodies and physical appearances of Indigenous peoples were unfairly forged through a colonizing Western gaze, based on Eurocentric aesthetic standards (Conor 2016). Indigenous people have been portrayed as ‘animalistic, not quite human’ and the ‘most docile creature lacking agency’ (Bond 2015, para 4). Indigenous Australian artist Troy-Anthony Baylis surmises:

it is as if history has constructed Aboriginality as being so pure and so savage … that if tainted by the complexity of sexuality and gender, mixed ethnographies, mixed geographies and mixed appearances, the whole look would be ruined.

What better way to colonize a people than to make them ashamed of their bodies and the expressions of those bodies? Perhaps the ‘original violence’ of colonialism was ‘to cover our being with its rules and regulations’ (Watson 1998, 2). The covering of Indigenous bodies in clothing, in legislation, in practice and in policies transpired in ways that were pathologized, exoticized and fetishized, obscuring Indigenous sexuality (Franklin 2014). Obscuring Indigenous sexuality, in this context, is described by Behrendt as ‘neo-colonial power relationships [which] carry the baggage and the legacy of frontier and colonial power relations’ (2000, 365). These analyses place Indigenous people in a context of heterosexuality, a binary that does not afford the voices of those who are both and neither, or, one without the other. These are racially and gendered snapshots of sexuality, stagnant images of femininity and masculinity that stifle Indigenous peoples’ knowledges and power over their own culture and identity. These representations, enacted through racialized, gendered and sexualized images of Indigenous people, heterosexual and pan-Aboriginal (meaning all the same), are not a novelty or coincidence. They serve a purpose. Colonialism demands that Indigenous people fit within the heterosexual ‘norm’.

The sexual and gender diversity of Indigenous peoples remains mostly absent from the records and interpretations of Australian histories, and these absences reinforce a hetero-centric reading of Indigenous Australian cultures. These representations often frame sexuality in terms of gender, and the performance of gender. The favouring of Western, social and cultural constructive discourses of gender, in particular of Indigenous Australian gender roles, tends to inscribe Indigenous people as oppressed, subordinated by patriarchal structures or performances (Clark 2017; Huggins 1991; Moreton-Robinson 1998, 2000). Rarely were Indigenous bodies and sexualities granted an agentic, diverse or self-determined presence in White Australian imaginaries.

The reluctance of scholars to discuss Indigenous sexuality is apparent by its lack of inclusion in the literature. While some studies are explicitly concerned with geographies of race and sexuality (McKittrick and Peake 2005; Oliver, Flicker et al. 2015; Peake 2010), geographers studying ‘race’ or ‘Indigeneity’ are culpable of often neglecting sexuality in their discussions or viewing
To shift away from Western discourses and engage with Indigenous ways of knowing and seeing the world would assist in dismantling ‘a priori categories but could also help undo dominant constructions of race, sexuality and gender that hide from view more humane and just ways of organizing the world’ (Peake 2010, 70). Unfortunately, we have yet to witness much work on the geography of sexuality conducted in this way: the ethnocentricity of the literature on sexuality and space remains largely unchallenged, despite the growth of material on the intersections of race and sexuality elsewhere (Hopkins 2018).

Although a relatively large body of work by Indigenous scholars aims to reposition representations of Indigenous Australian people as agentic and resistant (see, for example, Behrendt 2000; Langton 2008; Moffatt 1987; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Sullivan 2018), only a small number of ground-breaking seminal texts from Indigenous Australian scholars, artists and filmmakers provide Indigenous representations that pay specific attention to sexuality, bodies and gender and disrupt previously held beliefs. In her essay, ‘Well I Heard it on the Television’ (1993), Langton’s anti-colonial critique of colonial narratives, highlights ‘distorted’ and narrow representations of Indigenous Australian sexuality and gender. In the film Nice Coloured Girls, world-renowned artist and filmmaker Tracey Moffatt generates a powerful commentary of the way in which Indigenous women are represented through stereotypes, clichés and colonial moralism (1987). This body of work provides formidable and challenging observations in relation to representational politics. However, there is a glaring absence from broader research that attends to the voices of Indigenous Australian people, as well as those of Indigenous people globally, and their views on sex and sexuality.

Engaging with sexuality with Indigenous Australian sex workers

The narratives of Indigenous sex workers invigorate understandings of bodies and sexualities; their perspectives attend to concepts of Indigenous sexuality and, in doing so, transcend colonial limitations and enable a rethinking of sex, sexuality, gender and race. The inclusion of Indigenous female, male, trans and queer sex-worker narratives unsettles heteronormative conceptualizations of sexually based services and complicates depictions of sex workers as victims. These narratives are derived from a doctoral study investigating the everyday lives and experiences of seven Aboriginal sex workers. The participants in this study have self-selected a pseudonym to protect their identities. I employed a qualitative narrative approach to explore the stories that sex workers shared about their entry into sex work, their experiences within the industry and the implications of these experiences. The accounts were analysed thematically from an Indigenous Standpoint (Moreton-Robinson 2013; Nakata 2007). Instead of articulating Indigenous sexual and gender identities as a categorically imposed colonial demarcation, Indigenous Standpoint centralizes and positions Indigenous ways of seeing, doing and knowing as situated knowledges. Indigenous sexuality and gender diversity are hence positioned as a constitutive method of seeing, doing and knowing. Knowledges from the body are a form of understanding, a way of perceiving the world that occurs between and across bodies, cultures and geographies (Louis 2007; Martin and Mirraboopa 2003; Moreton-Robinson 2013).

For the purpose of this chapter, sex work is defined as an occupation where a sex worker is hired to provide sexual services for monetary considerations (Sanders 2013). Terms such as prostitute, sex work and sex worker generally invoke an image of a female and of sexual interaction with a client, who is presumed to be male, and is often seen as an entirely heterosexual affair. This fixation on female sex workers excludes other involvement in sex work, reflecting a particular void in sexual and scholarly interest. The inclusion of Indigenous, female, male, trans and queer sex-worker narratives unsettles the heteronormative thinking of sexually based services.
and complicates depictions of sex workers as victims. Although my research intention was to explore the experiences of Aboriginal people in the sex industry and to fill gaps in this area of knowledge, it soon became clear that there were further gaps in scholarly thought, particularly in regard to Indigenous Australians’ contemporary sexual relations.

From an academic perspective, Indigenous Australian sex workers are an under-researched group and therefore an unknown group of people. Recommendation number 5 of the 2012 New South Wales Sex Industry Report states that ‘Data on the sexual health of regional and rural, Aboriginal, street-based, male, and gender diverse sex workers should be sought and collated’ (Donovan et al. 2012, 8). Despite this recommendation, there remains a paucity of research in this area. The exclusion of diverse identities in scholarship on the sex industry restricts the political agency of Indigenous sex workers yet also reinforces the very gender dualisms that many feminist and queer scholars wish to challenge. The lives and voices of Indigenous Australian sex workers are concealed by discourses of exploitation and victimization that draw attention to marginalization and colonico-centric views and fail to include diverse stories and perspectives. Despite recent work that highlights the intrinsic nature of sex work as not all oppressive and as involving different kinds of worker and client experiences and varying degrees of victimization, exploitation, agency and choice, there remains a distinct silence in the literature (Sullivan 2018).

**Indigenous sex-worker views on sex and sexuality**

Like many previous studies of sex workers (see Vanwesenbeeck 2001; Weitzer 2005, 2010), the sex workers who participated in this study stated that money was their primary motivation for entering sex work. Many felt that the money earned in sex work was better than the earnings they could command in other jobs:

> At the time I wasn’t very skilled. I was still a uni student. I mean I could have got skilled in something else and got working but … I had no idea … no one was going to let me work the hours I wanted, when I wanted, and they didn’t pay me enough, I like the satisfaction of having money. It’s not easy being poor.
> 
> Majesty, trans

> I could do other work, I could be a cleaner. But most jobs aren’t very flexible, I choose my hours, the clients I see. And if I need time off like for school holidays, or one of my kids get sick, I can. I don’t want to do anything else, at least for now, this works for me.
> 
> Moina, female, heterosexual

> I work when I need the money, it’s straight like that. I only work part time so when I need extra cash or when my family is hustlin’ [for money] well I get my ass on the corner. It’s easier, it’s straightforward. I work till I get the money I need, sometimes a bit more and that’s it.
> 
> Bianca, female, heterosexual

> I like having extra money because I have a few jobs. But if I need extra money or I want extra money that would be a reason now that I work. Whereas maybe in the past it also might have been for my own entertainment, depending on the client I guess.
> 
> JJ, queer
I’m a good lookin’ guy. I know what I have and I know what others want. This is my time to make as much money as I can. I’m not gonna be pretty forever you know … my body and face would be wasted in an office, what’s the point! Later when I’m old I will go back to office work. I’ve been doing some consultancy work to keep my ‘normal’ career going for later, but for now I just want to make a tonne of cash and have fun.

Jack, male, gay

These narratives show that sex work was not chosen due to a lack of other choices. This observation is supported by the findings of Sanders (2005), who observed that, while most sex workers were likely from low-economic backgrounds, their entry may have been more related to a desire for economic and social independence than a means of survival.

Although economic benefit was the primary reason for sex work, there are indications that money was not the only motivator. JJ’s and Jack’s examples above highlight that interest, desire, intimacy and fantasy are also involved. Majesty highlights the difference between working in her male identity and in her trans identity: when she worked as a male, it was ‘about having money so that we could go to breakfast in the morning’, whereas as a trans woman Majesty’s sex work is far more complex and nuanced than it is about money, opportunity, emotion and validation. The work became:

less cash based, yeah. Although when the cash would present itself, why not? Is there something else sometimes? … there might be. There’s a possibility. This is what I need, you possibly need something, swapsies?

Majesty

In regard to sexuality, body and desire, the participants disclosed that providing sexually based services resulted in an improved sense of sexuality and bodily awareness. Although none of the participants were asked direct questions in relation to sex or sexuality, it emerged as a key theme within the research. Expression of sexuality was one of the foremost rewards of their line of work, underscoring the notion that, for some people, sex work has significant bodily implications that impart meaning and self-determination to their lives. For example, Jeremy, who identifies as a brotherboy (trans) and is bisexual, reveals:

it’s actually been a positive thing for me, I reckon. It’s just given me more positivity about sex and given me more confidence in myself as a trans guy to – well, just to be more open about myself sexually … I do it because I do like sex. I’m pretty horny right now. I want to fuck someone. So I’ll do it for that reason. [Or] it’s just about the money kind of thing, you know. You take the opportunity if it comes along.

Jeremy, brotherboy (trans), bisexual

Another example comes from Moira:

I was raised to not talk about sex, or even think about it really. Sex for women was something that we endured. Never enjoyed. Sex work has been eye-opening for me, I have learnt what I like and what I don’t like. I feel like I have more control over my body … I used to be real shamed of my body, but now I love it. Men love it. It makes me feel good. Sometimes I get lucky and the client is hot, like yes I would be
Indigenous Australian sexualities

interested if I met you at a bar kinda hot. When that happens I just enjoy it. It’s even better if he’s good at it.

Moira, female, heterosexual

There were other accounts that highlighted not only expressions of sexuality but also the fluidity of sexuality. For example:

sometimes do doubles, you know, with another girl, I consider myself to be straight, totally 100 per cent straight, but you know in those moments it can feel good. Maybe I am not so 100 per cent sure about sex anymore.

Bianca, female, heterosexual

Another participant intimated the sense of power and control that she derived from sex work. Isabelle says:

I thought sex was dirty, or that there was something wrong with you if you wanted, or liked, to have sex. I thought there was something wrong with me. I loved [sex work], I felt powerful, sexual and in control. There aren’t too many places where you can feel that way, as a Black woman, and be paid.

Isabelle, female, heterosexual

Isabelle expressed feeling affirmed by the positive attention from clients who valued her appearance, although she also offered reflections about the fetishized nature of her Black body. She said,

I would often get chosen for being ‘the Black one’; the girls get lined up for the client to choose or we meet him one after the other until he chooses one, you know, and they won’t remember my name, just my skin colour. But I’m OK with that; in the brothel, that makes me special, a bit exotic.

For Isabelle, the financial aspects of sex work led to her fiscal self-sufficiency and her social interaction, assisted by her exploration of her identities as both a sexual being and a Black woman. Sex work, for Isabelle, was a means by which to validate and explore aspects of those identities. Her satisfaction and enjoyment of sex work were linked to the financial benefits of the work, but also the feelings of power and control she felt.

For the most part, participants articulated feelings of satisfaction about their work, the way in which they used their bodies and their ability to utilize sex work to help to stabilize their lives financially. Although Indigenous sex workers fitting the popular negative stereotypes do exist and their experiences need to be recognized and addressed, those descriptions do not recognize the diversity of lifestyles and experiences that constitute Indigenous sex workers’ lives. Furthermore, such representations ignore broader structural understandings of the sex industry, which tend to portray Indigenous sex workers as oppressed victims who are incapable of rational choice. Rather, what can be ascertained from the voices of the participants in this study is that their involvement in the sex industry is predominantly about economic freedom, and it is also in some cases about sexual desire and sexual expression. The evidence provided by participants in my research is not of victimhood, exploitation or abuse. Rather, it is overwhelmingly a narrative of agency, bodily autonomy and self-determination. For the participants in this
study, entering into sex work is the outcome of a dignified rational choice for financial gain that has also had positive impacts on their sexual and gender identities.

Indigenous sexuality, as demonstrated by the narratives highlighted here, is not synonymous with biological sex (being female or male) or gender or defined by sexual practice (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual). It is matter of shifting relationships between bodies, desires, emotions, selves and others. It is something that should be self-determined and realized, rather than socially and culturally predetermined. Indigenous identities are not fixed; rather, they are evolving entities that are transformative, fluid, collective, personal and ambiguous. The narratives provided in this chapter refute the colonial claims of deviancy, victimization and social control that are used to explain and discipline and gender. Rather, the narratives illustrate that sex work is chosen by some Indigenous Australian people as a means of expressing agency and empowerment, and communicates a political statement through challenging the cultural, sexual and gendered identities that Indigenous people are normatively ascribed in society.

**Conclusion**

The ways that Indigenous people experience sexuality and gender in sex work are one path of inquiry into how gender and other identities are mapped onto bodies. While academic scholarship is increasingly addressing issues of sexual and gender identity at a macro level, its particular attention remains largely on a White or Western focus, therefore a conceptual deconstruction is required. The challenge of unpacking colonial lines of thinking on sex and sexuality in Indigenous Australia, it would seem, halts discussion or imagination of Indigenous sexuality. As Shino Konishi points out, ethnographies of Indigenous sexuality rely exclusively on European records to construct their images of Indigenous society and practices, however unstable (2008). While there is a considerable amount of material on Western, Eurocentric perspectives of Indigenous people and their sexualities and genders, it is difficult to find Indigenous people’s accounts of their views and perspectives of sexual relations, sexualities and gender diversity within the literature.

This chapter presents some of the first accounts of Indigenous Australian sex workers shared in the academic literature. Such voices are powerful, representing a discussion of sexual freedom and expression that is under-narrated throughout history and across written texts. Acknowledging, including and centring Indigenous perspectives of sexuality and gender are necessary in Indigenous, feminist and geographical scholarship. The narratives of Indigenous people contribute important understandings and perspectives, and such inclusion promotes exciting theoretical innovation with highly valuable insights. The narratives of Indigenous sex workers open the door for conversations around Indigenous sexuality being heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, cisgender, transgender, queer and non-binary. Such conversations challenge notions of sexuality, gender, identity and race. The future of geographical research must do more to engage with and include Indigenous people and perspectives. Indigenous people and their knowledges need to be centred, agentic and free to express themselves in their own voices. There is a growing insurgence of Indigenous academics actively discussing matters of relevance to Indigenous people globally. They have created a space for their voices where there was none, and the strength of this scholarship needs to be readily and actively represented and taken into account. The inclusion of Indigenous people’s academic literature, their voices, knowledges and perspectives in geographic and feminist literature serve to strengthen the discipline/s – if only they would listen.
Indigenous Australian sexualities

A provocation …

What if ‘we’, as scholars, refuse to accept the equation of Indigenous people and sex with shame, disease, victimization, exploitation or moral degeneracy? What if, let’s say, scholars stop reproducing and recirculating colonio-centric ideologies of who and what Indigenous Australia is? What if ‘we’ listen and include the voices of Indigenous Australians, centring them as the privileged holders of their own views and perspectives of the world? Contemplation of an alternative reality such as this might help to foster ‘our’ imaginations as ‘we’ try to envision a world in which Indigenous sex, sexuality and gender diversity are not shameful, taboo or to be hidden or silenced; where Indigenous sexualities and expression of those sexualities are not just considered, but where multifaceted, complex and nuanced views and perspectives are accepted – and, dare I say, even highly respected and valued. As scholars interested in sex, sexuality and gender research, ‘we’ need to open ‘our’ imaginations and ‘our’ ears, then perhaps ‘we’ will no longer be challenged by Indigenous Australians’ right to fuck and to be fucked, without being fucked over.

Key readings


References


