

Murray Chapple + Sue Kippax
with assistance from Michael Barts
+ Juliet Richters.

<http://members.tripod.com/reconciliation/chsex.htm>

Gay and homosexually active Aboriginal men in Sydney

Sex work

Sex work is one pattern that some Aboriginal men follow in coming to Sydney. Although it reflects the reality of low educational status and related employment difficulties, it also has benefits socially. Daryl says he made gay friends through his work in an escort agency. Mark speaks of the work as a lifestyle that provided financial and social benefits and he says: 'it just became part of my life'. What is interesting here is that, in a way, sexuality is produced in this work, and developed and constructed. Barry, who is currently still a sex worker, has a long history of this employment in both Sydney and Melbourne. Stating that his sisters and a male cousin are also sex workers, he says: 'It sort of runs in the family'.

"I worked on the streets at the weekend and back to school on week days. For eleven years I did that. . . Parlours. In the seventies you're talking about an era when we've basically just got the right to vote ... we still weren't considered human or part of Australia and here's a group of Aboriginal men who also are declaring that they're gay. If you really look at the situation I think you'll find the majority of those gay Aboriginal men back then were either street workers, selling themselves so that they could really just support themselves. There are Aboriginal men who are coming from the rural areas to major population areas and thinking 'oh this is wonderful' but being broke as well; now this was the only way they could survive."

John states that there are 'kids that are on the street who are not only stealing but are also sex working'. John commented that this particular group are 'put in the too-hard basket' as far as Aboriginal institutional response is concerned and that he has heard comments like 'well they shouldn't have run away from home'.

Michael provides valuable contextualising evidence of the embodiment of Aboriginal 'gay' sexuality. Michael is proud of his proficiency as a sex worker and his work in Kings Cross in the late 1960s and early 1970s is recalled with pride and pleasure. What is also notable in this account is Michael's transformation from an unskilled labourer to someone sought after for sexual and, later on, theatrical skills. The 'empowerment' Michael felt should not only be seen in the context of earning power, or in terms of resistance, though they were no doubt important, but in relation to the identity it gave him as a gay sex worker and self-esteem as an Aboriginal gay man.

"And I did it in its most wonderful form, I wore hats, braces and things with baggy pants, and I worked it and maybe it's an American thing but I tell you what, I kept my fuckin' head above water and I survived the fucker b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l-l-y. I say beautifully because I did. And those adjectives also because I talk about my sexuality which was an intricate part of me and I'm not ashamed of it. No it was lush and good."

To date, the literature on Aboriginal sexuality has constructed it in terms of exploitation and focused on gender, stressing powerlessness and domination. Contesting this, Tracey Moffat's 1988 film *Nice Coloured Girls* has been analysed as challenging the representation of Aboriginal women as objects of sexual relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, 'as victims of their racial and gender positions in Australian society', as either '

"wanton strumpets" or "shy maids" ' (Jennings and Hollinsworth 1988: 129). The exploration and documentation of the phenomenon of 'finding a captain' in this film is not only specific to Aboriginal women seeking firm and profit from the white men they pick up, it is also relevant to the practices of some homosexually active Aboriginal men.

The parallel that can be found between these men's experience and the one represented in Moffat's film is in the context of the active negotiation of the exchange and the understanding of 'its terms ... and [manipulation] of the balance of payments' (Jennings and Hollinsworth 1988: 129). Michael recalls his sense of power in these negotiations:

"I had it down pat . . . I could be in a club with my friends, where we'd all run out of money. I'd walk down the street, have a coffee, do a quick head job or be fucked up the arse, walk away from there with \$150 and go back and enjoy the thing . . . I played there and I knew the Cross [Sydney's red-light district] like the back of my hand."

"White fellas! White fellas! I was brought up with white fellas! I've called a few 'blue veins' [referring to the white penis]. You know. Fuck me . . . and I loved it, I didn't mind."