



The Politics of Passion

Women's Sexual Culture
in the Afro-Surinamese
Diaspora

Gloria Wekker





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resembled a Benin death mask. I sat and lay in bed with her, feeding her okra soup, chatting, laughing, and reminiscing about the days we had lived together. When Mama Matsi called me two months later to say that Juliette had passed, just days before her ninety-first birthday, I arranged ads on the Surinamese Kankantri radio station in Amsterdam, listing myself as her daughter, and I observed mourning rites, as she had taught me to do them properly.

Back in the United States or in the Netherlands, when people have asked me: "What did you actually do during your research period?" I have been able to truthfully and simply say: I lived. I lived with gusto, with passion, with curiosity, meaningfully connected with illuminated parts of my self and with significant others. I could not wait to begin every new day, never having been as productive before: coauthoring a book and writing several articles besides doing the research. I sometimes wondered whether this was real: one of the happiest periods in my life and being funded to live it. Comparing this fieldwork experience with a previous one in France, I know that the intensity of my feelings in Suriname was and is deeply connected to my bringing my whole self into the situation: my Creole, woman-loving self met its karma. In the encounter of my selves with various other significant selves, I have received some lasting gifts. The (self-)knowledge I gained through my connection to Juliette has become part of the universe I inhabit. One of the legacies Juliette has left me is that she has given me a glimpse of how mati of her generation spoke with each other; moreover, by becoming fluent in Sranan Tongo under her guidance, she has bequeathed their speech to me. She has enlarged my *bere*/my matrikin by giving her family to me. Simultaneously, she has given me to her family: we attend each other's *bigi yari*/crown birthdays; I dance at their Winti Prey for the *kabra*/the ancestor spirits of the family, thus for Juliette. As my family, they come to my book launches and they attended my oration, when I accepted the IIAV chair²⁷ at the University of Utrecht. Juliette gave me the most exquisite and intimate gift: understanding the lived reality and the beauty of the mati work, its sociocentricity, its passion, its longevity, and its survival wisdom.

"Optimism," said Cacambo, "what is that?" "It is the madness of asserting that everything is good, when it is evil." Candide looked again at the negro, and burst into tears; thus weeping, he entered Surinam.

VOLTAIRE 1993 [1759]

2

Suriname, Sweet Suriname: A Political Economy of Gendered and Racialized Inequality

Globalizing forces have always been at the heart of Suriname, this former plantation colony that quite literally was a Dutch creation in the service of "King Sugar" in the seventeenth century. Great Britain and Holland fought for possession of the colony and the Dutch were able to establish hegemony in 1667 (Wolbers 1861; van Lier 1977 [1949]). Later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the princes of tobacco, coffee, and cotton were served. In the twentieth century bauxite, rice, fish, oil, wood, and gold became the main export products.

In Voltaire's *Candide or Optimism*, Candide and his traveling companion Cacambo visit Suriname in their search for the "best of all worlds." On entering Suriname they find a negro lying on the ground. He is only wearing a pair of blue linen breeches and his left leg and right hand have been cut off. When interrogated about his condition, he says: "When we labour in the sugar-works, and the mill catches a finger, they cut off a hand. When we try to run away, they cut off a leg. I have suffered both these misfortunes. This is the price at which you eat sugar in Europe" (1993 [1759]:55).

Beside illustrating the representation of Suriname as one of the cruelest slave regimes,¹ there is another significant aspect to the black man's words: they bring the interconnectedness between Suriname and Europe, which has existed from the beginning of European expansion, into focus. By pointing

out the sweet material presence of Suriname in Europe, Voltaire invokes the significance of globalization processes. In fact, globalization has been at the heart of Suriname's genesis and in that sense Suriname, like the rest of the Caribbean, has always been modern.² Suriname, to paraphrase Mintz's words, has not been on the margin of the world system but, historically, squarely in the system's foundation.

Mis' Juliette's life history forms part of a larger and longitudinal research project, which, in its broadest formulation, seeks to understand the sexual configuration that she inhabits in both an African diasporic and a global context. In this chapter I want to begin to lay the groundwork for this undertaking by addressing three themes. First, I want to introduce Suriname as a political economy of gendered and racialized inequality in which women are consistently positioned in less favorable, more marginal locations than men of their class and ethnic background. Human sexual lives cannot be considered apart from the political economies in which those lives are embedded (Lancaster and di Leonardo 1997b). I focus on the last decade of the twentieth century. Second, I want to situate *The Politics of Passion* in current theoretical work in gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (gbtq) studies on the construction of sexualities. In addition, I will outline the contents of the book, the themes that are central to it and make its intellectual investments explicit. Third, I will provide a brief genealogy of the project and provide some methodological information.

Suriname is a relatively little known part of the black Diaspora. Located on the northeast coast of South America, Suriname, formerly Dutch Guyana, is the middle part of the Guyana Shield, and it is neighbored by Guyana and French Guiana. Suriname is home to about 440,000 people, who mainly live in the northern strip. Suriname celebrated its independence from the Netherlands in 1975, but independence did not bring the expected prosperity. Independence provoked massive outmigration. In its most recent past the country has known a brutal military dictatorship under the leadership of D. D. Bouterse (1980–1987, 1990–1991) and a civil war between the military and Maroons (1986–1992). Even though Suriname has returned to civilian government, the consequences of the dictatorship are still palpable and visible.

Following patterns that were established during the colonial era, the nexus that the Dutch Caribbean—Suriname and the Dutch Antilles—is embedded in still privileges connections with the former European metropole, the Netherlands, more so than ties with the Caribbean region. Few studies on Suriname are written in or translated into English, which means that comparative work, involving the Dutch Caribbean, is rare (Trouillot 1992).³ Additionally, the bulk of research on the Caribbean has tended to focus on the English-speaking region. The complexity of Suriname's genesis

and its cultural and linguistic richness, based on the presence of a large variety of ethnic groups, has failed to attract the attention it deserves. Based on its cultural and linguistic diversity, Suriname, together with Trinidad, Belize, and Guyana, has been classified as the most complex type of society found in the Caribbean.

An Inegalitarian Political Economy

The gendered and racialized inequality of Suriname's political economy, especially the ways in which women are positioned as marginal both within the economy and within the political apparatus of the state, is the general backdrop against which women organize their lives. My central understanding is that even though Afro-Surinamese women have a long tradition of economic independence and authority within the household, they, like all other women in Suriname, are still maneuvered into secondary status within society at large. Like women elsewhere in the Caribbean, they are made to defer widely to male authority in the public domain and are confronted with several problems arising from gender discrimination in the labor force and violence from men (Brydon and Chant 1989). The secondary status of women in the public sphere is the backdrop against which Afro-Surinamese women have assumed primary responsibilities in the domestic sphere, and have managed to give continuity to their constructions of sexual subjectivity.

Scholarship on Caribbean societies has, in most traditions, naturalized masculinity. It is only in the past decades that feminist scholarship has started to understand gender, class, and race oppression as parts of a unitary system (Shepherd, Brereton, and Bailey 1995; Beckles 1999; Yelvington 1995; Barrow 1996). The pertinent statistical data are not always available to make these intersectional analyses. I understand gender inequality, moreover, to be integrally related to broader processes of uneven development, articulated both in national and in international spheres (Harrison 1988; Sassen 1998). The world capitalist system embodies a structure of labor market segmentation wherein workers of peripheral countries receive no more than one sixth of the wages received by their counterparts in the advanced industrial center (Amin 1980). Since female workers receive considerably less than their male counterparts, Third World women represent a *cheaper than cheap* segment of the international work force (Harrison 1988). The brunt of these exploitative relations is borne by Third World women.

Since the last census of 1980 in Suriname, a policy decision was made no longer to register people by ethnic status because of its potentially disruptive consequences for the precarious racialized balance of power. Suriname

consists, in order of size, of seven main population groups: Hindustani, Creoles, Javanese, Maroons, Chinese, Amerindians, and Europeans. Data from Household Survey Statistics by the General Bureau of Statistics for the period 1995–1997 estimate the following percentages:

TABLE 2.1 Surinamese Population by Ethnic Group

Hindustani	33.5 percent
Creoles	31.8 percent
Javanese	16.0 percent
Maroons	5.4 percent
Indigenous people	5.4 percent
Chinese	2.0 percent
Europeans	0.4 percent
Other	1.0 percent
Mixed	5.9 percent

Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek, 1993–1997, *Huishoudens in Suriname*.
Note that the total exceeds 100 percent.

The total population of Suriname was estimated at 433,517 persons at the end of 1999, of which 65 percent live in Paramaribo.⁴ Creoles, or Afro-Surinamese, are the second largest ethnic group, comprising about 32 percent of the population. Afro-Surinamese working-class women of different ages and with different sexual styles take center stage in this book. Creoles are an urban population, the descendants of slaves, and they distinguish themselves—ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and psychologically—and are distinguished by others from Maroons. The Maroons⁵ nowadays consist of six nations, with their own territories and languages. They are the descendants of slaves who fled from the plantations starting in the seventeenth century to form autonomous communities in the interior of the rain forest. Creoles and Maroons continue to be sharply distinguished groups, both in Suriname and in the Netherlands.

After the abolition of slavery (1863), indentured laborers from India, Java, and China were imported to work on the plantations. The ex-enslaved went to the capital in large numbers, working as artisans, laborers, in domestic service, and as washerwomen, while the Hindustani⁶ and Javanese,⁷ after their periods of indentureship, initially stayed on the plantations in small agricultural enterprises. The Chinese set up neighborhood grocery stores, after their indentureship. The Lebanese,⁸ who have always just been a frac-

tion of the total population, came to Suriname from the end of the nineteenth century on as traders and merchants.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Surinamese society could be divided into an upper class consisting of white Europeans, mainly senior officials and their families who only stayed in Suriname for a short period and who—unlike their predecessors—did not mix with other groups; the middle class was made up of Jews and light-skinned Creoles; finally, a large working class consisted of blacks, Hindustani, and Javanese (van Lier 1977). While, three decades ago, it was still possible roughly to identify specific ethnic groups with specific positions in the class structure in Suriname (Brana-Shute 1976; Kruijer 1973; van Lier 1977), today the picture is less clear-cut. Several factors have played a role here: there has been considerable ethnic mobility, both in a horizontal sense, since Amerindians and Maroons have moved into Paramaribo in significant numbers, and in a vertical sense, since Hindustani and Javanese have moved into positions in the bureaucracy, which used to be a Creole stronghold.⁹ In addition, foreign labor¹⁰—in the eighties Guyanese, Koreans, and Haitians and in the late nineties an estimated forty thousand Brazilians and an unknown number of Hong Kong and mainland Chinese—has filled positions in agriculture, fishing, construction, domestic service, and in gold digging, retail trade, and supermarkets. Most important, a group consisting of Creoles and Hindustani has, since the eighties, moved into the center of power. The state has not been capable—and some would say not willing—of controlling this group of “new rich,” but rather is challenged and infiltrated by them. President Venetiaan (1992–1996, 2000–2004, 2005–) coined the term *tarantulas* for this group. Dividing spoils from various illegal activities, the group is made up of connected and overlapping circles of those formerly in the military, which staged a coup in 1980 and again in 1990, politicians, international traders, cocaine and weapons dealers.

In the most general terms, global inequities between First and Third World inhabitants have persisted and intensified in the past decades, making the rich richer and the poor poorer. In Suriname the influence of accelerating globalizing processes since the end of the cold war has been visible and palpable in a variety of indicators. The selling out by the government of the timber and gold industries to foreign multinational interests and the large-scale insertion of Suriname in a transnational drugs economy now form part of the Surinamese landscape. The government has aggressively sought investment in the gold sector to exploit the substantial gold and diamond deposits thought to underlie much of the interior, which, incidentally in the view of the government, is home to Maroons and Amerindians (Kambel and MacKay 1999). With the gold mining industry, damaging extraction technologies, releasing substantial amounts of mercury into the environment, have been introduced

and many waterways have become unfit for human consumption. Moreover, multinationals from Indonesia and Malaysia have obtained favorable government contracts to cut timber in the rain forests, upsetting ecological balance, ruining infrastructure, and, under soft obligations to replant, leaving large gaping areas in the interior. The consequences of these globalizing developments, the debt crisis in which Suriname finds itself, its chronic lack of foreign currency, and the neoliberal measures taken by the government, such as the Structural Adjustment Program (1993–1996), made themselves felt in the everyday lives of working-class women.¹¹ This is not only the case for the inhabitants of the interior, Amerindians and Maroons. Until the 1950s Indigenous peoples, that is, Amerindians, and Maroons were not considered to be part of Surinamese society (Kambel 2002). They were constructed as having no rights to the territories they inhabit and had, as Kambel convincingly argues, come to “fulfill the role of the undeveloped, pre-modern ‘Other’ whose claims to natural resources cannot be justified,” primarily because they are construed as obstacles to national development (2002:15, 126). City dwellers, too, have increasingly felt the deteriorating spirals of an economy in recess.

This study focuses on the sexual subjectivity of women in the underclass and in the lower strata of the working class, in Suriname called the volksklasse. At the beginning of the nineties, after a decade of economic decline, the middle class comprised 27 percent and the elite 6 percent of the Paramaribo population, according to a survey study (Schalkwijk and de Bruijne 1999). Almost 70 percent of Creoles in Paramaribo belonged to the underclass (15 percent) and to the working class, or volksklasse, the popular class (51 percent). These segments of the lowest strata in themselves are very heterogeneous. The differences between the working class and the underclass are located in highest educational levels; in the working class one typically finds lower levels of secondary education, and in the underclass it is primary education. The underclass typically lives in wooden houses without running water and has the largest number of persons in the household (4.9 persons versus 4.7 for the popular class). Other differentiating factors are the number of wage earners and the number of appliances, e.g., refrigerator, TV, washing machine, car, and air-conditioning in the house (Schalkwijk and de Bruijne 1999:59). Among Creoles in the popular and underclass, families with women as single heads of households are three times as frequent as in the middle class (Schalkwijk and de Bruijne 1999). Ultimately I have found that the quality of the national and, more important, international, networks that people can access is decisive in determining class status. Poverty in Suriname is correlated with one's educational level, but, most important, with not having effective networks of relationships, locally but, far more

consequentially, globally. The breakdown in percentages for the different class strata—elite, middle class, volksklasse, and underclass, must by the end of the nineties most certainly have taken more polarized forms, but there are no data to support this. In general, accurate statistical data are notoriously hard to come by in Suriname. Moreover, most statistics pay attention to ethnicity, not to gender or to both gender and ethnicity. At the end of the nineties important Surinamese government agencies like the General Bureau of Statistics (Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek: ABS) were forbidden to publish poverty rates and poverty lines.¹² In the summer of 2004 the bureau burned down, the fire destroying all its records.

Despite the differences between the underclass and the working class, in this study I will generically use the term *working class*. My informants came from both segments of the class structure and in the section on methodological decisions I will come back to the issue of class in Surinamese society.

Surviving the vicissitudes of urban life for Creole working-class women, who are often single heads of households, is an intricate task for which one must muster appreciable savvy. Social capital in the form of networks of (grand)mother, sisters, neighbors, and friends, either near or far, is indispensable. Often unable to count on the financial contributions of the father(s) of their children and with negligible quarterly amounts of governmental child support coming in, it is up to women to keep their households afloat.

In 1990 women were estimated to form about 40 percent of the labor force (Tjoa 1990a), and this percentage has, with some fluctuations, remained the same. But it is generally acknowledged that this percentage is not accurate, since women suffer more intensely from unregistered unemployment and underemployment. In addition, labor market trends indicate loss of real income and an increasing movement toward informal employment among women.

The government has remained the largest employer over the past decade and while the exact number of civil servants is unknown, it was estimated in 1997 at 60 percent of the total labor force, or thirty-seven thousand people. Women comprised one third of that number and were overwhelmingly located in the lowest salary brackets (Ketwaru-Nurmohamed 2000). Women, especially women who are single heads of households, cannot possibly survive on their government salaries and need to find additional income in the informal sector. When talking about single heads of households, it is overwhelmingly Afro-Surinamese women who come into view, since in the other large urban ethnic groups, Hindustani and Javanese, marriage is more common, as we will see in chapter 4. Women are found in the least profitable sectors of the informal market, which comprise an extension of women's “housewifely” duties: baking, catering, hairdressing, washing,

ironing and sewing clothes, cleaning houses, selling produce in the market, and peddling lottery tickets. Men, on the other hand, are located in the better paying sectors of the informal sector: driving a taxi, auto repair, furniture manufacturing, shoe repair, buying and selling foreign currencies, drug trafficking, and gold mining.

In 1990 ten of the twenty-five working-class women in my study worked in government service, as office and school cleaners, street sweepers, and low-level office personnel. They fell in the lowest salary scales, but a government position was still attractive because it supplied health insurance for the entire family and a pension. The actual salaries in the formal, bureaucratic sector are low, with the government as the largest employer serving as a safety net. The vast majority of civil servants earned a monthly income on or under the poverty line, which in 1990 was sf 1,300 for a family of four. This amount, which at the time translated to about U.S. \$65, underlined the necessity to seek additional income. In actual terms it meant that women worked, yet remained in poverty.

In 2001, when I last spent an extended research period in Suriname, there were visibly wider discrepancies between rich and poor and there was a conspicuous cash flow, evident in luxurious new mansions, complete with swimming pools, and luxury cars. Under the Wijdenbosch government (1996–2000) there had been a striking increase in commodities for sale in the stores—food, computers, bikes. These were only accessible for the middle and upper classes who had the capacity to spend. Moreover, nine casinos had opened their doors.

The conspicuous wealth, which was evident in 2001, was largely attributable to illegal funds from trading and drug trafficking that were plowed back into the economy. The Surinamese guilder had been on an inflationary course since the eighties.¹³ Suriname is heavily dependent on its main exports of bauxite and aluminum, constituting about 77 percent of all exports, while domestic production and consumption strongly rely on imports as well as development aid (Kromhout 2000). Access to foreign currency had become vital to one's position in the class structure in Suriname. Due to falling world market prices for bauxite, the periodic suspension of Dutch development aid, consumptive overspending of successive governments made possible by monetary financing, and generally poor governance, the economy had suffered greatly and per capita real income fell from U.S. \$2,028 in 1984 to U.S. \$880 in 1997 (Schalkwijk and de Bruijne 1999:24). During a short period, at the instigation of the IMF, a Structural Adjustment Program (1993–1996) was implemented, which further undermined the financial position of the low income groups in particular as well as their access to health care and other government services. Poor governance is manifest in the endless growth of the bureaucracy, which

in an ethnically organized spoils system¹⁴ expands with each new government that comes into power; the eroding of once successful industries (sugar, rice, glass, brick); the focus on grand top-down development schemes, which were doomed to failure; the unwillingness to decentralize and to effectively involve the population in decisions (Ketwaru-Nurmohamed 2000). The Inter American Development Bank calculated in 1996 that only three countries were poorer than Suriname in the Western Hemisphere.

While traditionally the working class has always comprised the largest number of people, at the beginning of the twenty-first century their numbers had swelled even more, because one could safely say that people who did not have access to foreign currencies had fallen below the poverty line. This included middle-class women, e.g., nurses and teachers, who did not have such access and who were solely dependent on their own incomes. In 2000 70 percent of households in Suriname were classified as poor (ABS 2001).¹⁵

Of the twenty-five women I had worked with in 1990, three had died in 2001, seven had migrated, six to the Netherlands and one to the U.S., and fourteen had survived in Suriname. The majority of these had had financial help of a mother, an aunt, or a sister in the Netherlands, but almost all had had to intensify their activities in the informal sector. The most decisive factor in survival in 1990, but even more so in 2001, had become access to foreign currency, either in U.S. dollars or Dutch guilders. Foreign currency may come from one of five sources:

First, from family members in the Netherlands. Several researchers agree that Creoles and Hindustani received more support than other groups (Kromhout 2000). Suriname is a transatlantic community that includes all the various ethnic groups. This community is bound through ties of kinship, friendship, political and economic interests and, importantly, financial support by the Dutch Surinamese in the form of packages—containing in the beginning of the nineties everything from food, clothes, popular magazines to toilet paper and toothpaste—and transmittances. The total financial impact of Dutch Surinamese on the Surinamese economy, in terms of tourist spending, transmittances, and parcel post, is estimated at U.S. \$110.7 million, that is, 23.4 percent of the annual average national income, during the period 1992–1997 (Gowricharn and Schuster 2001:168). Although precise data regarding the development of this financial support over the past two decades are lacking, it is argued that the amount of the support has risen. The economic situation in Suriname has deteriorated explosively, while that in the Netherlands has improved, including for migrants from Suriname, which is expressed in more generous support to family members in Suriname (de Bruijne, Runs, and Verrest 2001).

Second, access to foreign currency takes shape through services rendered to Surinamese from the Netherlands who spend money in the city. Of all

migrant groups in the Netherlands the Surinamese display the strongest wish to remigrate (Pieper 2000), fueled by a nostalgia for "Suriname, sweet Suriname," which is one of the strong but power-evasive images representing Suriname among both those who lived in Suriname and those who migrated (Wekker 2004b). The traveling back and forth of Dutch Surinamers to Suriname makes the trajectory Amsterdam-Paramaribo one of the most profitable for the Dutch and Surinamese national carriers. The transfer of foreign currencies is related to personal services like sewing and washing clothes for tourists; hairdressing, cooking, catering for parties, and rendering spiritual services in the domain of the Winti religion. Entire Creole families go to Suriname to fulfill their spiritual obligations to the ancestors. Musicians in Paramaribo, too, benefit from the intense traffic. Fully catered tourist trips to the interior form another source of foreign income. Another important source is sex services. A number of 35 registered brothels and 152 locations where sex business is conducted in Suriname is striking for such a small population (Stichting Maxi Linder 2000:4, 16). Sex work benefits both women and men; young men are popular sex workers.¹⁶

Third, foreign currency may be accessed from a pension, (part of) a salary, a fee, or social security benefits in U.S. dollars or Dutch guilders. This modality is applicable, for instance, to the workers and the retired from Suralco, the U.S.-based bauxite company, and to retired military personnel, who served in the TRIS, the Dutch colonial army. A parastatal company like Staatsolie paid its higher employees partly in dollars. These groups consisted predominantly of the elite working corps, i.e., males. Increasingly, professionals such as doctors and lawyers demanded payment in foreign currencies.¹⁷ Social security benefits from the Netherlands can legally be taken to Suriname when one is sixty-five years old, but it is common knowledge that younger people, both men and women, manage to do so.¹⁸ Dutch social security for a single person was about nf 1,450 or E. 650 a month in 2000. Someone who had this income—well over sf 1,200,000—is definitely not working class but rich in a Surinamese context. At that time, a teacher at a teacher's training college made approximately sf 300,000 a month; a director of a ministry sf 500,000. A new development over the past decade, from which some middle-class men and women benefit, is the local establishment or expansion of international agencies like IDB, WHO, UNDP, FAO, UNESCO, and UNIFEM that hire local consultants to draft policy papers.¹⁹ A number of men and women left positions in government service to start their own consultancies.²⁰

The fourth source of foreign currencies is legal trade activities. An important characteristic of former plantation economies is the dominance of the import sector; the biggest segment of national income is traditionally spent

on import products. While 55 percent of goods and services used in Suriname are imported, comparable import quotas for the U.S.A. are 7 to 8 percent. In general, it has been very difficult for governments to impose import restrictions, not only because of the well-developed "First World" taste of many Surinamese consumers, but also because the state is successfully pressured by national trade interest groups (comprador bourgeoisie) not to support import-substituting industries. Since even for local industries import of parts and ingredients is necessary, trading is a most profitable endeavor. In the import trade of cars and other means of transport, food and beverages, building materials and technological equipment, again men dominate.

Fifth and finally, there is a variety of illegal activities, including gold digging, cocaine trade, and trafficking,²¹ in which foreign currency is obtained. Both men and women smuggle cocaine, but it is predominantly men who organize the trade and thus profit disproportionately from it.

Access to appreciable amounts of foreign currency is thus not gender-blind. It follows clear gender-based patterns and working-class women have most probable access to it through remittances from their family members, male or female lovers in the Netherlands and from tourists. While classes have become more multiethnic since the eighties, women have not kept equal pace with men of the same ethnic group in gaining access to the higher classes. As far as I have been able to ascertain, there was only one woman in 2001 who was part of the highest income brackets, through her activities in building and gold digging. Women have typically gained access to the highest echelon in the class structure as spouses or as buitenvrouwen/ outside women. In chapter 4 we will follow twenty-three-year-old Andrea Zorgzaam, who, unable to make ends meet on her own income, was on the lookout for a man who preferably had access to foreign currency.

Thus, the overall picture of a dually segmented labor market has continued and exacerbated during the decade (1990—2001) under review. In the "heavier" and more profitable sectors of the formal and informal economy we consistently find men, working under better conditions and earning higher salaries. Women, on the other hand, work in the "softer" sectors of the economy, for the government where wages are notoriously low and in the informal sector. Moreover, as Ketwaru-Nurmohamed states: "decreased economic growth was clearly visible in private sectors that employ the majority of women, for example agriculture, fishery, manufacturing, restaurants and hotels. In sectors where mostly men were involved, such as mining, quarrying, transport and technical sectors, there was a relative growth" (2000:16). The implications are that clearly over the past decade all women in the lowest income groups have suffered, in ways which sometimes are similar and different in other respects.

The inegalitarian income situation is facilitated by the false, patriarchal premise, upheld in a powerful discursive formation that includes the state, business, and much commonsense thought, that women have a male head of household at home and thus need only worry about additional income. This premiss damages all women. Clearly Maroon and Amerindian women who migrated to Paramaribo, as a result of the civil war (1986–1992), came unfamiliar with city life, with little formal education and without formal sector job skills. Their ideological positioning as being “outside of the nation” made it possible for the government to deny any support to them, except the social support to which everyone is entitled (Ketwaru-Nurmohamed 2000:16). Hindustani and Javanese women, while they often are not single heads of households, have suffered progressive declines in their standard of living, because the proceeds from fishing and agriculture, have fallen dramatically. Since they are, moreover, conceptualized as “housewives,” their labor is virtually invisible. They, too, number among the poorest in society. Afro-Surinamese women are located at a juncture where the contradictions between a traditionally heterosexist political economy and their own constructions of subjectivity are acutely felt. It is among this group that we find more single, female heads of households than in other ethnic groups.²² Since we know that there is an inverse relation between poverty and the number of income earners per household and that among all ethnic groups Creole households have a disproportionately high number of female heads, it follows that the number of Creole female headed households under the poverty line will be significant.

→ Poverty in Suriname is feminized and also has ethnically divergent patterns.

A final, brief word about political empowerment. Politically, women have made some progress in the past decade. Of the highest political and bureaucratic offices, president, vice president, fifteen ministers and secretaries of state, numerous government and policy adviserships and the Auditor General's Office, none was occupied by a woman in 1990–91. None of the fourteen judges were women. In the National Assembly, the highest representative body, three of the fifty-one members were women. In 1991, a first in history, three female directors of ministries were appointed, of which two were appointed ad interim. Of the managerial layer within the government, the largest employer, 83 percent were men and 17 percent were women in 1992. Numerical relations between men and women in other important sectors, like higher education, the medical professions, banking and business, consistently showed the same patterns (Malmberg-Guicherit 1993).

Malmberg-Guicherit (1999, 2000) notes that women's participation in the National Assembly had risen to 16 percent in 1996, and in the judiciary from 27 percent in 1994 to 39 percent in 1998. There are still no women ambassadors, against 10 men in that position. After a failed attempt to found a women's

political party, PVVU (Politieke Volks Vrouwen Unie) in 1991 (Wekker 1997), in 1999 two new political parties were initiated, Naya Kadam and Doe, who had women, Marijke Djwalapersad and Monique Essed-Fernandes respectively, as chairperson. Malmberg concludes that the growing number of highly educated women, who are outperforming men, is not mirrored in a sufficient number of women in leading decision-making and executive positions.

In summary, a political economy of gendered and racialized inequality is forcefully present in Surinamese society. As elsewhere, male dominance is secured by the ideological move of presenting the sexual division of labor as “natural,” i.e., that women's place is in the home, even when economic conditions do not allow women the luxury of being without paid work. Racialized, sexualized and classed images construct women as inherently different not only from men, but also from each other. The intersectional work of ethnicity, class, sexuality and gender that goes into these constructions is ignored, so that they pass for eternal, cultural “truth.” But these images in their turn play a part in allocating women to particular economic positions; positions in the informal sector, in the lowest income scales, in sectors of the economy that are most vulnerable to economic turbulence (Wekker 2004:6). Women are in structurally disadvantaged positions in comparison with men. Afro-Surinamese women in the working class are culturally prominent, however. The tensions that arise from contradictions in different important domains of life, play themselves out in sexual spheres.

Theoretical Engagements of *The Politics of Passion*

What's love got to do with it?

TINA TURNER

The Politics of Passion sums up several insights that are central to my understanding of sexuality. The title points to the constructed nature of passion and the sociocultural arrangements that undergird and construct it. Instead of understanding passion and sexuality as “natural” phenomena, as God-given, context-free, and eternal, the title is a reminder that sexuality in a particular setting is something that people shape collectively on the basis of their cultural archives and changing political and economic circumstances. Furthermore, *The Politics of Passion* centrally addresses to issues of power. Instead of indulging in romantic notions about relationships, *Politics* acknowledges that power is negotiated both in cross-sex and same-sex relationships, that there is a politics to passion. In both types of relationships passion is not something that can be engaged blindly and spontaneously. Finally, the title

speaks about the agency of women in the sexual domain. Women are not mere pawns in someone else's game; rather they have collectively given shape to an alternative and parallel sexual culture in which they protest the power inequities inherent in the dominant gender regime. *The Politics of Passion* needs to be situated in ongoing debates within anthropology in general and within the blossoming field of gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender-queer (glbtq) studies and I want to make some of its investments clear. The book is novel in that it deals with an African diasporic sexual culture, which includes women who are sexually active with men and/or women and women who are exclusively involved with men. Women's sexual practices and relationships, no matter who the object of their love or passion is, arise from the same ideas about sexual subjecthood, thus offering a configuration that moves outside of the sexual identity binaries that are so characteristic of Euro-American cultures. I will insist upon alternatively using "indigenous" terminology for the women who are central in this book and terms like same-sex and opposite-sex sexual activity, instead of opting for a universalized use of the situated terms *lesbianism/homosexuality* and *heterosexuality*. I will locate the book within the sexual identity versus sexual activity debate. I will, moreover, note its bridging of the chasm between traditional preoccupations within gay male studies, that is, sexual activities, and within lesbian studies, that is, gender (Wekker 1999; Lewin 2002); I will situate the work within a strong version of social constructionism theory, that moreover takes note of political economy and I will place it within the transnational turn in glbtq studies.

This study, in centralizing a concern with a female black diasporic sexuality, engages with the ways in which some received anthropological understandings in the fields of kinship, family and marriage, subjecthood and globalization are modified and enriched, when the naturalized heterosexual contract is interrogated, deconstructed and laid to rest. Ethnographic discussion of glbtq themes is productive, meaningful and rewarding (Lewin and Leap 2002:5). The blossoming of these studies in a variety of adjacent disciplines in the humanities, the social sciences and their intersections—has allowed new, eye-opening insights into the anthropological canon and some of its established concerns.

Although my work evolves within the intellectual tradition of feminist anthropology, I refuse to choose to locate this study, either within lesbian or within queer studies, the two most likely candidates. To the extent that lesbian studies has usually taken a fixed sexual identity, something called "female homosexuality" or "lesbianism" as its starting point, this study does not fit in. Queer studies, on the other hand, defines itself by its difference from hegemonic ideologies of gender and sexuality (Weston 1998:159; Duggan 1992; de Lauretis 1991) and thus there is more affinity here. Queer studies

has neither overwhelmingly impressed me so far as being a site where a radical scholarship, grounded in a sexual politic of anti-colonial and antiracist feminism could flourish, nor have extratextual approaches been prominent. I thus remain somewhat awkwardly situated between these different communities of discourse and, as a "scavenger theorist" (Halberstam 1998), this is not the most unproductive site to be located at.

I will avoid the signifiers "lesbian," "female homosexuality" and heterosexuality throughout this study, because of their Euro-American situatedness and their unwanted baggage. In the hands of the Church, medicine, psychology and psychiatry for over a century, sexuality, especially homosexuality, has been molded and recast as "sexual identity" (D'Emilio 1984), the most "authentic" part of self. The concept of "lesbianism," too, has firm connotations of a fixed sexual identity and it is highly problematical to impose the term on practices and relationships that have very different meanings, embeddedness and a genealogy in other cultures. The mati work shows a very different construction and underlying belief system of same-sex sexuality than lesbian identity as it exists in contemporary Western Europe, North America and other "Western" locations. Importing the Euro-American terminology means unwitting acceptance of the legacy of guilt, sin, disease, of notions of male activity and female passivity, of the "natural" superiority of heterosexuality, which can only hamper an understanding of the black diasporic cultural-sexual complex I describe and analyze. Moreover, it means endorsement of the deeply essentialist fallacy that female homosexuality crossculturally carries the same meanings. The terms that I will use, e.g., *female same-sex relations*, *same-sex* and *opposite-sex sexual activities*, are more neutral and inclusive. In many instances I will simply use the translated local term, *a mati wroko*/the mati work.

Weston has opposed the move to employ indigenous categories "as no more neutral in its effects than the earlier, less reflective application of "homosexuality" to a multitude of occasions" (1998:159). According to this view, using indigenous terms constructs the subject of inquiry as always and already Other and these "foreign terms" "become implicated in a renewed form of Orientalism in which linguistic terms subtly reify differences and buttress ethnographic authority" (1998:159). I read Weston's statement as symptomatic of power relations within the field of lesbian studies, buttressed and reflected in the insufficiently problematized dominance of Euro-American terminology. The tendency to offer up Euro-American terminology as the approximate substitute for the universal and the reluctance even among lesbian theorists to let go of that dominance and to imagine other sexual universes, is deeply troubling and has all the trappings of a neo-imperial gesture.

The Politics of Passion is, as far as I know, the first monograph that centrally deals with black diasporic women's sexualities. In the twenty years that have passed since Hortense Spillers lamented the situation of black women as "the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb" (1984:74), only slight progress has been made towards uncovering "the pleasures and dangers" in the sexual lives of black women (see Rose 2003). It is not without significance, in the context of North American society in which black female sexuality has historically been maligned and vilified, in which black women chose to don "the cloak of dissemblance" after slavery (Clark Hine 1989) to hide their sexual personae, that this field of study has not been as productive as might have been expected. The professionally disastrous course that still attaches to writing about sex in a North American context may have lost some of its sharpest edges in the past decades, but it still holds sway, and a fortiori for black American feminists, making it hard to write about sex.

The majority of feminist studies of same-sex sexuality is still overwhelmingly located in or pertains to white North American communities and only a few of these have paid attention to the intersections of gender, "race" and sexuality (but see Kennedy and Davis 1993). According to the hegemonic logic, which sees gender only as pertaining to women and ethnicity as having pertinence only for people of color and in which gender is fundamentally separated from ethnicity (Wekker and Lutz 2001; Wekker 2004a) male gender and white ethnicity are still seldom thematized in sexuality studies. Many studies have foregrounded and normalized whiteness, without problematizing it and treating whiteness as if it were not a racialized position, while paying scant attention to non-white sexualities. Particular local, "Western" constructions of female same-sex sexuality have thus often unproblematically been universalized as normative. "Third World" women have for a long time typically been portrayed not as sexual agents but as sexual victims in such a framework (Mohanty 1991). While recent work has taken up that challenge, we should remain careful with assuming that the genealogies of sexual subjectivity in a female African diasporic context are the same as those constructed in Western contexts. A recent development that is to be applauded is that female same-sex studies have gone outside the usual geographical orbit, e.g., China (Sang 2003), Japan (Robertson 1998) and Greece (Kirtsoglou 2004) have come into view. This book goes outside of two usual orbits, by centralizing black women and the Caribbean. In addition, *The Politics of Passion* hopes to offer a template for thinking about black diasporic women's sexualities more generally, as building—to varying degrees—on a West African cultural heritage in the domain of sexual subjecthood.

In cross-cultural same-sex studies, intersections of sexuality and "race"/ethnicity have been implied but not foregrounded and studies of male same-sex sexuality have been dominant (Herdt 1987; Herdt and Stoller 1990; Parker 1991, 1999; Lancaster 1992). Ellen Lewin (2002) has insightfully commented on gay and lesbian studies as an "unhappy marriage" because of their diverging trends. Gay studies are preoccupied with sexual behavior, while lesbian studies mostly engage with gender, without trespassing on each other's main terrains. In my study I break with this binary by paying attention to both sex and gender in describing women's sexual practices. As an "outsider within" (Hill Collins 1986), looking in on lesbian studies, I cannot escape the strong impression that this field of study is first and foremost a North American affair, displaying the same ethnopsychological attitudes toward sex, that society at large holds. Like dutiful daughters, feminist anthropologists have, by and large, honored their civilization's discomfort with sex, by overwhelmingly not writing about its specifics, thus reinforcing dominant representations of women's sexuality. Gayle Rubin's words are still well worth quoting in this respect. Writing on what she calls "sex negativity," Rubin notes:

Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force. Most Christian tradition, following Paul, holds that sex is inherently sinful. . . . This culture always treats sex with suspicion. It construes and judges almost any sexual practice in terms of its worst possible expression. Sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent. Virtually all erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. The most acceptable excuses are marriage, reproduction and love. . . . *But the exercise of erotic capacity, intelligence, curiosity, or creativity all require pretexts that are unnecessary for other pleasures, such as the enjoyment of food, fiction, or astronomy* [my emphasis].

RUBIN 1984:278

The abundant erotic enjoyment and "mastery," the capacity to talk about and to tell sex that is evident in many mati relationships, stands in stark contrast to what I still consider to be the most prevalent Euro-American sexual "mood" and mode.

Cross-cultural studies of female same-sex sexuality remain relatively marginal in feminist studies and unjustly quarantined, as if they do not have anything meaningful to contribute to the study of sexuality generally (but see Blackwood 1986a, b; Newton 2000; Blackwood and Wieringa 1999; Manderson and Jolly 1997; Elliston 1995; Lewin and Leap 1996, 2002).

The Politics of Passion is not solely concerned with same-sex sexuality, however. It provides an account that deals both with opposite-sex sexuality

* and same-sex sexuality. This inclusiveness, a both/and stance (Hill Collins 1990) claimed by many, is in keeping with the way in which Afro-Surinamese working-class women themselves conceptualize their sexuality. The book lays out a black female sexual configuration in which both women who are only involved with men and women who engage in relationships with men and with women partake. Afro-Surinamese women's sexual practices and relationships arise from the same conglomerate of beliefs and ideas about sexual subjecthood, which, as I argue, build on unconscious West African "grammatical" principles (Mintz and Price 1992 [1976]) in the domains of subjecthood and sexuality. With this configuration, Afro-Surinamese women move outside of the identity binaries that have characterized sexual being in Euro-American settings, during the last century. A female same-sex sexual culture has maintained itself, according to most scholars at least during a century but in my understanding appreciably longer, in the framework of a general sexual culture, with which it shares ways of understanding the world, practices, women moving between various sexual locations and, importantly, the idea that the sex of the object of one's passion is less important than sexual fulfillment per se.

→ One of the central debates in glbtq studies over the past decades has been the question of whether same-sex sexual activity can best be understood as identity or as behavior. It is also a prominent issue in *The Politics of Passion* and I explicitly take a stand on the side of behavior. I have much sympathy for Elliston's thoughtful (1995) critique that dividing up the world between those who have a sexual identity and those who engage in sexual activities, leaves unexamined the core problem of what will constitute "sex" or "the sexual" in either category. This distinction "happens," moreover, to coincide with a First World/modernity-Third World/tradition split. Nonetheless, I arrive at this position by taking Afro-Surinamese women's own accounts seriously, when they talk about their sexuality in terms of activity, when they use a verb, *m'e mati*/i.e., I am doing the mati work, instead of a noun, *mi na wan mati*/I am a mati, which would linguistically and grammatically have been equally possible. Yet, they do not use the latter construction at all, pointing to the importance of their cultural construction of same-sex sexuality. The problem that Elliston quite rightly discerns—what is to count as "sex"?—did not play out in this context: there is no ambiguity whatsoever about what constitutes "sex" or "the sexual." In chapters 4 and 5 I will outline linguistically the Afro-Surinamese landscape in which the politics of passion takes shape. My research on mati work unsettles some "received feminist truths" about the nature of women's sexualities. Mati are part of and form a configuration in which women unabashedly enjoy sex; they talk about it openly, within parameters of mutual trust; they take it seriously, in the sense

that sex is important to them; it is seen as healthy and as an extremely joyful and exciting part of life. With mati we typically do not encounter problems prevalent among white North American lesbian middle-class couples, among whom a sharp dropoff in sexual activities frequently occurs after the second year of the relationship, due to the "merging/fusion/enmeshment" of selves (Nichols 1987; Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective 1987). "Sexual death" in bed was unheard of; according to all accounts, mati are active sexual partners and it is possible in their universe not only to make distinctions between sex with men and women, but also to disentangle sex from love, without the moralistic overtones that so tend to shroud Western feminist discussions of sex. Mati are not the proverbial Prisoners of Love; indeed, more often, it might appropriately be asked, "What's love got to do with it?"

Mati work challenges received notions of female sexuality as passive, muted and non-genital, in that it is the opposite of all these characteristics. It is active, vocal, often genitally oriented and above all, self-driven. Women are conceived as sexual beings who can act on their desires. Mati work presents a configuration where erotic and sexual relations between women are public, acknowledged, validated and often openly celebrated. It offers a radically alternative configuration to the historical genesis of "homosexual identity" under capitalism (D'Emilio 1984; D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Faderman 1991). Mati work is seen by the actors in terms of behavior; no "true, authentic" homosexual self is claimed. And, finally, it flies in the face of the supposedly simple relationship between gender and sex, with sex either seen as derivative of gender or gender as a product of sex. The Afro-Surinamese gender system in the working class is flexible, a system of possibilities, not constraints, and it is undergirded by a conceptualization of subjectivity which allots "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics to all people. As has been noted for other working-class gender systems in the black Diaspora, differences between biological men and women are not stressed, but a remarkable degree of likeness and social equality between men and women is noted. So, for instance, both black American working-class men and women display emotional expressiveness, mothering behavior, individualism coupled with strong interpersonal connectedness, take independent sexual initiative and they possess a strong sense of selfworth (Lewis 1975; Stack 1986). My own data on Afro-Suriname bear this out. The Afro-Surinamese gender system is buttressed by a linguistic system with genderless aspects, which undermines a strict incarceration in one's biological body. It allows women, without incurring stigma or other social punishment, to "lie down" with other women.

This book is committed to a form of social constructionism that deeply takes political economy into account. I read the mati work as expressive of

a strong form of social constructionism (Vance 1989). Instead of a purely textual approach, which often has a tendency towards autism, this study is informed by and combines multiple and inclusive interdisciplinary approaches: starting from ethnographic practice, it builds on insights from history, African American and Caribbean studies, cultural studies, linguistics, religious studies, queer theory and political economy. In that sense, the book may be characterized as employing scavenger theory, as well as a "scavenger methodology" (Halberstam 1998). In attending to material practices in that supposedly most intimate domain of sexuality, which seemingly only involves the personal, the micro level, I also pay attention to changes at the macro level, e.g. changes in the economy, in globalization processes, which effect what everyday life looks like. While I pay close attention to the local context, I also take the broader global contexts into account that these women inhabit, reflect and rework. Recent work in glbtq studies, too, has taken up the call for a "transnational turn" in studies of sexuality and to stop taking the nation-state as the privileged and self-evident site for investigation (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999; Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 2000; Grewal and Kaplan 2001; Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan IV 2002). I fully agree with Sang that this well-meaning injunction is a reminder more useful to queer theorists who are preoccupied with Western sexualities than to scholars who have been studying sexuality in modern Third World nations, who have had to think transnationally all along. She argues that "even when a particular non-Western space for inquiry is ostensibly identified as the nation, it is always already shot through with colonial, imperial, transnational, cosmopolitan, global—whatever we call it—presence and valence" (2003:9). This is singularly true for Suriname and its traveling sexual cultures and in following the women, study of the Netherlands as a postcolonial and postimperial space became inescapable. Often such recent, transnational studies of gay and lesbian men and women have focused on the surfaces and commonalities of such movements, "reading social life off external social forms—flows, circulations of people, capital and culture—without any model of subjective mediation" (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999:445). In-depth ethnographic analysis, allowing precisely for such subjective mediation and agency, has not been one of the strong points of such studies. In chapter 6, I will focus on mati women who have migrated to the Netherlands in the nineties and I will show how they negotiate the new lesbian discourse of identity with their own understandings of the mati work, against the backdrop of largely unexamined, dominant metropolitan representations of black women's sexuality.

The Politics of Passion engages with several communities of discourse that usually do not communicate. Sexuality studies have not often taken the Caribbean as their place of action, while insights from religious studies,

linguistics, or globalization studies are not usually wedded to theories of subjectivity. I try to bring insights from these various discursive communities together, in order to do justice to the depth and the complexities of Afro-Surinamese formations of sexual subjectivity.

There are five central themes that the book seeks to address.

Caribbean Women's Life Histories

Few life histories of Caribbean women exist. There are beautiful literary evocations of Caribbean girls and women (e.g., Brand 1994, 1996; Kincaid 1983, 1992, 1996; Cliff 1987, 1995; Danticat 1994, 1996, 1998; Condé 1986) and some collections of interviews with and stories about Caribbean women (Ford-Smith 1986; Elwin 1997), but there are no first-hand social scientific testimonies that foreground the sexual subjectivities of Caribbean women. Here they tell in their own words, filtered, obviously, through my translation and composition, about their lives. Alongside the general circumstances and vicissitudes of their lives, and the ways in which they made a living, I was especially interested in issues of subjectivity and sexuality.

Kinship and Naturalized Heterosexuality

This book challenges the dominant representation that exists in anthropology of working-class Caribbean women, culled from that pervasive and perniciously deployed concept, advanced to explain family relationships in the black Diaspora, matrifocality (Moynihan 1965, Whitten and Szwed 1970; Smith 1996). Women and men are constructed in particular ways within the framework of matrifocality. Anthropologists have implicitly or explicitly contrasted the ways in which men and women perform their partnership and parenthood with the "normal" ways of partners in the Western nuclear family. The Caribbean protagonists in this familial drama have come up seriously short, giving rise to gendered pathologies in the literature. Peripheral to any particular household, men spend their time in various households and form unstable relationships with partner(s), being more attached to their mother and sisters. The imagery about men that is called up in matrifocality is that of the tireless sexual hunter. Women are constructed in contradictory ways. On the one hand, they are the too powerful, castrating figures around which the household orbits, psychologically, emotionally, as well as economically. On the other hand, women come to the fore as sexual victims, waiting patiently for the sexual hunter to bestow his favors on them. They are continuously duped by men whose sweet-talking induces them time and again to have babies in hopes of holding on to them. The lives of several of

the women who are central to this book show that this dependent, passive imagery lacks substance in the case of many Afro-Surinamese women.

Another received cluster of wisdom that *The Politics of Passion* wants to critique is the implicit naturalization of heterosexual relationships upon which kinship universally is thought to be based (Blackwood 2005). Instead of the nuclear unit, consisting of a man and a woman, whose offspring cement blood ties with family members on both sides, this study shows that kinship relationships also stem from long-term relationships between two women. Whether it is the children of two mati, who have grown up together and who consider each other kin, or connections formed through two meti/"cowives," as we saw in the case of Mis' Juliette's meti Corry whose daughter Cecilia considered Juliette kin, kinship ties are formed through and between women. In fact, the notion of family, so precious and valued among a population whose forebears in majority did not have relatives when they first set foot on Surinamese soil, became one of the building blocks of "New World" societies (Mintz and Price 1992 [1976]). "Family" is a strong metaphor among mati and nonmati alike, *un tron famiri*/we have become family, indicating the indissoluble bonds that have been established.

Black Female Sexuality

To date, we have no comprehensive full-length historical and sociological understanding of the meanings of sex in the lives of women of African descent, wherever they find themselves. In fact, much of social science research has focused upon the ostensibly negative indicators of an unbridled sexuality: high fertility rates and teenage pregnancies, disproportionately high rates of sexually transmitted disease (STDs) and HIV/AIDS infection, out of wedlock births, rape and "broken" family structures. But the inner sexual lives of black women, how they think about themselves sexually, remain a mystery. What we have learned about black female sexuality has been culled primarily from the work of literary authors, critics, and historians (Spillers 1984; Lorde 1982; Clark Hine 1989; Carby 1986; Davis 1998; Brand 1994, 1996; DeCosta-Willis, Martin, and Bell 1992; Constantine-Simms 2000; Carbadó, McBride, and Weise 2002; Rose 2003).

The social scientific study of black female sexuality remains a gaping wound. Both in colonial and postcolonial contexts, black female sexuality has in Euro-American dominant discourses been mainly constructed as immoral, pathological, excessive, animal-like, insatiable, transmitting disease, or otherwise as instrument of destruction. The particular intersections of gender, "race," class, and sexuality in which black women's sexuality gets constructed bears the ineradicable mark of Otherness. Whether in cultural

artifacts—paintings, literature, and film (Young 1996)—or in everyday life, this sexuality always already carries the burden of various displacements and projections. Systemic and epistemic violence has been enacted against black female sexual bodies (Gilman 1985; Hammonds 1997).

This anthropological study of the ways women in Suriname, a meaningful part of the black Diaspora, think and talk about their own sexuality may begin to fill this tremendous and painful gap.

Cultural Continuity in the Domain of Sexual Subjectivity

The elaboration of West African heritage in the black Diaspora has been researched with regard to languages, religions, family structures, arts and aesthetic principles, music, motor behaviors, and philosophies, but so far constructions of sexual subjecthood have not been engaged. I imagine the West African grammatical principles governing personhood and sexuality operating like jazz. Improvising upon certain basic themes—a notion of personhood in which the secular and the spiritual are intertwined, the importance of fertility and parenthood for both men and women, the full sexual subjectivity of women, sex as an extraordinarily pleasant part of life that may be engaged in to an advanced stage in life, sexuality as activity rather than exclusive identity—musicians (m/f) in various parts of the black Diaspora have produced riffs that are remarkably similar: working-class women, who typically have children and sexual relations with men and women.

If my line of reasoning holds any validity, we need to ascertain whether phenomena resembling the mati work can be located in Africa and in other parts of the black Diaspora. Data about same-sex sexuality from the African continent and its underlying psychic and spiritual economy are frayed. Yet the scant data that are available about Ashanti (Herskovits 1967 [1938]; Christensen 1950–51) and Zimbabwean women (Epprecht 1998; Aarmo 1999) who have sex with other women point tantalizingly to a construction similar to that which organizes the mati work: women who engage in same-sex are conceptualized as having a "heavy 'soul'"—a "masculine soul" that likes to lie down with women. It is, furthermore, telling that phenomena comparable to Surinamese mati work are found elsewhere in the Caribbean, e.g., *zami*, *making zami*²³ on Grenada, Cariacou, and Dominica (Lorde 1982; Elwin 1997), on Trinidad (Brand 1994, 1997), and on Barbados; *antiwoman* on St. Kitts; *malnom*, *antiman* on Dominica (Elwin 1997), *sodomite* and *man royal* on Jamaica (Silvera 1992; Ford Smith 1986); *kapuchera* on the Dutch Antilles (Clemencia 1995); *ma divine* in the French speaking Caribbean,²⁴ all pointing to a broad-based West African cognitive and behavioral repertoire that found expression and acceptance, under different circumstances in various

former slave societies. In the African American context I am reminded of the openness with which the classical blues singers Bessy Smith and Ma Rainey sang about their love for women, e.g., in "Prove It on Me Blues" (Carby 1986; Davis 1998). According to Carby, if we want to hear the voices of working-class women, we need to listen to the blues.

In African American literature that is situated in the fifties and sixties we find descriptions of female same-sex relationships, that are accepted in the working class (e.g., Lorde 1982; hooks 1997). In Lorde's biomythography *Zami* she describes the sexual relationship of the protagonist with her colleague at the factory, Ginger. Sleeping over regularly at Ginger's home and in her bed, Ginger's mother Cora comments offhandedly: "Friends are nice, but marriage is marriage" and on a night when Ginger has gone out: "And when she gets home don't be thumping that bed all night, neither, because it's late already and you girls have work tomorrow" (1982:142).

The mere possibility of cultural continuity in the domain of sexual subjectivity is not welcomed by some vocal constituencies. Apart from Christian fundamentalists globally, homophobic Afrocentrists and black nationalists in Euro-America reinvent black masculinities and femininities to suit their images of "productive" families, which, exclusively conceived, are the only ones who can continue the nation. These groups find themselves consonant with conservative voices from the African continent who maintain that homosexuality is not indigenous to Africa but an aberration taken over from Europeans (Epprecht 1998; Aarmo 1999; Gevisser 2000; Mburu 2000). With this book I want to join those who argue that same-sex sexuality has firm roots in the African heritage. This statement does not imply that I believe sexual configurations are static and bounded. I will in fact show that the *mati* work is simultaneously changing, both in Suriname and as it establishes itself in the former metropolis, as well as holding on to its organizing principles. I argue that the specificities of local sexual cultures can only be understood as they are caught up within the crosscurrents of global processes of change (Lancaster and di Leonardo 1997b). I thus walk a fine line between being sensitive to continuity and to change in a necessary analytic tension between an emphasis on local meanings and an understanding of global processes (Parker 1999).

Sexual Globalization

The Netherlands occupies a privileged position in the global cartography inhabited by Suriname. Since Suriname reached its constitutional independence from the Netherlands in 1975, when so many Surinamese "voted with their feet" and left for the Netherlands, Suriname can best be imagined as

a transnational community that has almost the same numbers of people living on either side of the Atlantic. To every four Surinamese in Suriname, three live in the Netherlands.²⁵ Ninety-five percent of Suriname's outmigration is to the Netherlands, with the U.S., Aruba, and the Dutch Antilles making up the remaining 5 percent. This points to the centrality of the Netherlands as a social and cultural point of reference in the Surinamese imagination and reality.

The feminist genealogy that best allows me to understand the globalization of Afro-Surinamese working-class women's culture is transnational feminism (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 2001; Alexander and Mohanty 1997). This brand of feminism pays close attention to the local, the specific geographies women inhabit, as well as to the global: the ways in which global political, economic, and cultural processes reverberate with local realities. Transnational feminism tries to understand women's positionalities through a relational and comparative frame. Moreover, it does not limit itself to an analysis based on the hegemonic category of gender alone, but wants to investigate women's positions from the complex intersections of gender with race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, and nation. At stake is the insight that women's and men's lives anywhere cannot be fruitfully understood by focusing on gender only and that to persist in this power practice means naturalizing the hegemonic poles of various other relevant binaries: white racial/ethnic positions and heterosexualities. Finally, transnational feminism is deeply interested in the persistent production of inequalities, through the complex intersections of gender with "race," class, sexuality and nation.

I am committed to raising questions about what happens to this black diasporic sexual culture both in Suriname and in the Dutch sexual landscape. As an appreciable number of the women migrated in the past decade, I became increasingly curious about the ways in which migration and transcultural shifts shaped their sexual subjectivity. Instead of following the recurrent trope in discourses of globalization, that of teleological development, i.e., cultural homogenization in the field of sexuality through international travel, TV, the Internet, and other new media, my work focuses on the empirical details of female same-sex connections as they are lived in Suriname and in postcolonial space in the Netherlands. By working with local and global meanings, *The Politics of Passion* provides depth and thick description to a transnational sexual phenomenon and looks in detail at the bricolage that Afro-Surinamese women engage in to make sense of themselves.

My work, finally, also brings a transnational perspective to bear on representations of white Dutch women's sexuality in Dutch postcolonial space since the advent of migrant women of several groups.

A Genealogy of *The Politics of Passion* and Some Methodological Issues

The book explores approximately a decade in the lives of twenty-five women, ranging in age from twenty-three to eighty-four years of age at the start of the research, who are involved in cross-sex and/or in same-sex relationships. *The Politics of Passion's* original questions were how do working-class Afro-Surinamese women survive amidst the manifold crises that afflict society and how do they organize their sexual subjecthood? The project started with my doctoral field research in 1990–1991 (Wekker 1992a) and has become an ongoing, longitudinal study that follows the women I worked with in their daily living, in their transatlantic crossings and relocations, in their relationships, and in what gave them joy amid the multiplicitous economic, political, and moral crises characterizing Surinamese society. In the past decade I have regularly been back to Paramaribo. In 1992, 1993, 1996, 1997, 2001, and 2002 I visited, for two weeks to two months each time, to look up the women and to update my data, for example, the development of income and cost of living. Moreover, I wanted to know what the impact of ten years of economic roller coaster rides had been on their sexual culture, understandings, and practices.

I initially met the women through volunteer work at the YWCA in Paramaribo and subsequently through different methods, such as the snowball method. When I started doing research with twenty-five women in 1990, I selected them on the basis of a combination of income and occupation. There was no misunderstanding between me and the people whom I asked for help in locating Afro-Surinamese working-class women. The income of the women was to be around or under the poverty line, which was 1,300 Surinamese guilders (= sf), for a family of four in 1990. Often these women would be single heads of household, responsible for taking care of several children and sometimes other dependents, and they would simultaneously have two or three different jobs in the unskilled or informal sector. They lived in working-class neighborhoods all over town, Abrabroki, van Dijk, Schimmelpenninck, Pad van Wanica, Flora A and B, Kasabaholo, and Tam-menga Project. Their occupations included street and market vendor, street sweeper, religious specialist, factory worker, domestic servant, lower office personnel, seamstress, washer woman, disk jockey, musician, bartender, waitress, huckster, caterer, baby-sitter, hairdresser, "broker"²⁶ or intermediary for department stores, and cleaner. Two women were full-time specialists in the Afro-Surinamese Winti religion. Many women had more than one occupation; they often held two jobs a day, and one worked three jobs a day. Many women had one job in the formal sector, mostly working for the gov-

ernment, the largest employer who forms a safety net, in order to be assured of medical insurance, and worked in the informal sector on the side.

During the research process I used a multiplicity of methods, amounting to what Halberstam has called a "scavenger methodology, combining information culled from people with information culled from texts" (1998:12). My methods have included participant observation, semistructured interviews, collection of life histories and family stories, folk seminars, collection and analysis of popular and religious song lyrics and of odo/proverbs, collection of the lexicon of the self, content analysis of stories in popular magazines and newspaper articles, and ethnosemantic analysis.

The number of children the women had varied between none and eleven, with older women having more children. Of the twenty-five women, six had no children (yet). Of four of these, it was certain that they would not have children anymore, either because of their age, their health situation, or because they expressly said they did not want them. The relational situation was less clear-cut, because it changed during the course of my 1990–1991 research. At the beginning of the research period twelve women did not have a relationship with a man, seven had a visiting relationship, six women lived with a man, of whom two were married. In a visiting relationship a man usually comes to visit a woman. At the end of that first research period nine women did not have a relationship, thirteen had a visiting relationship, and three lived with a man, of whom none were married. One man of the two married couples had been killed during a brawl and the other couple had separated. Behind these dry numbers there are real people, with their histories and stories. The situation is even more complicated because both in the category of "concubines" and among the "visitors" there are changes in the composition of the couples. It may be the case that a woman who was living with a man, at the beginning of the research, was still living with one, at the end, but the man was another. Some women had more than one male partner.

I did not approach women on the basis of their supposed varied sexual repertoire. I was not sure, in the beginning, how to go about phrasing sexual behavior as a sampling criterion and assumed that if I had a wide enough range in terms of other criteria, such as age, occupation, domestic situation—with and without male partners—there might be a good chance that I was also indirectly sampling for different sexual activities. This turned out to be the case. Later ten women told me that they had (had) mati relationships. These women are in all three categories of relationships with men: they may not have relationships with men at all, they may live with a man (and be married), and they may have a visiting relationship. It is only rarely that mati live together; women usually have their own home that they rent

or possess. They live with their children and they have visiting relationships with each other.

By 2001 three of these twenty-five women had died, including Mis' Juliette. Seven women, the younger ones, the most ambitious and resourceful, had migrated to the Netherlands, and one, who originally was a migrant from Guyana to Suriname, had moved to the U.S. I have kept in touch with several of these women. One of them, Lydia de Vrede, we will encounter centrally in chapter 6, in the context of sexual globalization. The life of Andrea Zorgzaam, a twenty-three-year-old administrative assistant at the beginning of the research, will be foregrounded in chapter 4.

Afro-Surinamese women have been my main interlocutors in this research. As far as men are concerned, my data are mostly limited to my own observations about men and to women's accounts about them. Inevitably, however, over the course of such a long period of involvement, I have come to know some men quite well, e.g., neighbors, sons, and lovers of women I have worked with and whom I have interviewed. I have also come to know several male mati and younger men who call themselves gay.

Content of the Book

The next chapter, 3, deals with the worldview and the discourse encapsulated within the working-class Winti religion, with its galleries of Gods and spirits and its implications for gendered personhood and sexuality. The cosmology of Winti, whether women are active practitioners of the religion or not, underlies the organization of this black diasporic sexual culture. The focus on Winti is followed in chapter 4 by one on relationships between women and men, specifically on a complex among Afro-Surinamese women that attests to the undesirability of marriage and the desire to be economically independent and have children. I investigate whether and how they accomplish this and what the attendant ideas and practices about family and kinship are. Chapter 5 foregrounds the institution of the mati work with its characteristic roles, rituals, and regulations. I will present historic data that are pertinent to the phenomenon and offer a black diasporic reading of mati work. In chapters 4 and 5 collectively I explore features of Afro-Surinamese working-class women's sexual culture and which of these should be attributed to the West African heritage. Finally, in chapter 6, I present a reading of the globalization of Afro-Surinamese sexual culture, both in Suriname and in the Netherlands. In addition, I reflect on representations of white women's sexuality in Dutch postcolonial space.

Mimpana mimpana popo o
 We begi a kara
 Mimpana mimpana popo o
 We begi a misi
 Mimpana mimpana popo o
 We begi a masra
 Mimpana mimpana popo o

[We are begging the "soul" (to come)
 Mimpana mimpana popo o
 We are begging the woman¹
 Mimpana mimpana popo o
 We are begging the man]²

ANONYMOUS WINTI SONG FOR THE "SOUL"

3

Winti, an Afro-Surinamese Religion, and the Multiplicitous Self

Before I began doing field research in Paramaribo in 1990, I was wary that it would take me into the domain of Winti, the Afro-Surinamese religion mainly practiced among the working class. Until then I fleetingly witnessed signs of Winti in Amsterdam at the few ritual events I had attended and at parties. I was slightly awed by these events and made sure to get myself out of the immediate way.

As a child, Winti was only talked about in my family in a dismissive, disparaging way. When either my siblings or I had a temper tantrum, my mother would scold us to "dance our Winti" elsewhere, not in her house. Moderateness and rational, controlled behavior reigned supreme in our home and Winti represented the opposites: being out of control and irrational. No doubt, my initial wariness of Winti was influenced by those not so subtle messages. Many middle-class Afro-Surinamese have internalized the centuries-long colonial dismissal of *negerachtigheid*/negrolike behaviors and manifest a potent mixture of awe, fear, alienation, ignorance, and disdain toward the religion. One of the markers of being middle class has long been to have left Winti behind. I intended to keep away from Winti. Even in the beginning of my stay, I still hoped I might study constructions of selves, gender, and sexualities without having to get into Winti. I thought that it would be possible to simply bypass a cosmological system, not fully understanding