The Politics of Passion
Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora

Gloria Wekker
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Eseline Predison, 1922–1982
Juliette Cummings, 1907–1998
Audre Lorde, 1934–1992

For three Caribbean women
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ideology that stresses independence, self-worth, and self-respect. Motherhood is for both the ultimate characteristic and fulfillment of womanhood. They all see relationships with men predominantly as a locus of exchange between sex and money.

Second, mati have more sexual knowledge and pleasure because in the all-female arena they freely exchange sexual knowledge and transmit the knowledge to younger generations. They do not see each other as competitors for scarce resources. They have a more independent understanding of their own sexualities.

Third, the mati work undermines a number of received feminist paradigms. The notion that men maintain universal hegemony over women's sexuality is contradicted by these data (Rich 1980). Bonds between women in their own behavioral environment are institutionalized, validated, and celebrated.

The mati work shows a sexual configuration where women unabashedly enjoy sex, are active sexual partners, and can disengage sex from love. From all accounts, I have concluded that mati sex is genitally oriented and not the “vanilla,” cuddly brand that has so normatively been considered as the hallmark of feminine sexuality by mostly white women. It seems to me that part of the excitement in mati sex may stem precisely from the “dangers” inherent in the play with and the constant contesting of boundaries, the rights of both partners, and dominance/submissiveness. The mati work underscores the need to study sexuality and gender as two distinct arenas of social practice: one can be a woman and not have a muted, passive sexuality nor a fixed, cross-sex sexual orientation.

Finally, the mati work offers a radically alternative configuration to the historical genesis of homosexual “identity” under capitalism (cf. D’Emilio 1984; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Faderman 1991). The line of reasoning I have adopted is that the institution can be most profitably understood as an elaboration of an African set of principles guiding the construction of selves, genders, and sexualities. Sexuality is not conceived as expressive of a “core,” “essential,” “authentic,” “true” self, but as behavior.

Chapter 6 will follow women in their transatlantic travels, during the nineties, to the postcolonial space of the Netherlands.
Euro-American form of female same-sex desire. This expectation is alive in commonsense discourses, but it is also fed by academic discourses that see an unproblematic unidirectionality in the field of sexual globalization, a triumphant progress and transfer of sexual forms and identities from the West to the Rest. Into this rather simplistic, linear evolutionary equation I want to insert a set of complicating factors. In hegemonic versions of sexual globalization ahistoricism and an overlooking of continuing imbalances of power have shaped the definition of Euro-American sexualities as normative and non-Western sexualities as deviant. The actual meeting of lesbianism and the mati work in the Netherlands, from the middle of the seventies, is prefigured in the system of Dutch Empire. In contradistinction to the preferred standpoint in the Netherlands that imperialism is something regrettable that happened elsewhere, was perpetrated by other nations, and is thus external to Dutch continental history and identity, one of my central understandings is that imperialism, the invention of race, and the hierarchization of sexual configurations were fundamental aspects of Dutch modernity. In Dutch postcolonial space new representations of gendered and racialized bodies reinvigorate existing structures of inequality through the work that these representations do in dominant imagery effecting legislation, the market, the state, and economies of desire.

Studying sexual globalization within the Dutch-speaking cultural ecumene requires acknowledgment of the inescapable and overarching prisms of postcolonialism, postimperialism, and migration. It is to this postcolonial, transnational cultural space that I have shifted my gaze in this final chapter. The Dutch colonial empire was not only an economic and political system but also a social and cultural system welded together through language as well as through "a mass of ... common institutions ranging from administrative and religious practices to architecture, from university curriculae to literature" (King 1991b:6). In the domain of sexuality a by now impressive body of literature traces the epistemic and real violence of the circulation of discourses constructing black women's sexuality in opposition to white women's sexuality. In Stoler's rereading of Foucault, "race" was at the root of sexual constructions in the metropoles, which were transferred to the colonies and then, after having been doused in "porno-tropics," back again to the metropoles, normativizing white women's sexuality (Stoler 1995; McClintock 1995). The cultural sedimentation of the colonial system in the metropolis is a deep-seated conglomeration of imagery constructing black women's sexuality as overactive, deviant, excessive, closer to nature, not in control, and animal-like.2

Stuart Hall, writing from the perspective of British Empire, introduces the distinction between "Global Imperialism" and the "Global Postmodern," noting different constellations that are operative in organizing "racial" difference:

Global Imperialism is the era of empire, of British (English) domination in which other human races are deemed inherently inferior and denied their own voices, while the Global Postmodern refers to a decentered world of American mass culture. Ironically, it is a world in which the previously silenced have found a voice with which to fight for new places. Global Imperialism describes a world centered around nations organized in a hierarchy of domination, while the Global Postmodern has lost any such hint of totalizing logic. It describes a world in which homogeneity calls forth diversity, in which difference is pluralized, deployed and valorized rather than enclosed in water-tight compartments of superiority and inferiority.

(HALL 1991)

It remains to be explored, however, through grounded ethnographies such as the one I am attempting here, how these two templates—global imperialism and the global postmodern—are operative in the sexual domain and how they are connected in the Dutch-speaking postcolonial cultural ecumene. I will foreground the operation of gender and "race" in processes of sexual globalization. The transition between the two templates is not a smooth and teleological one; it is uneven, contradictory, nonsynchronous, and palimpsestic.

A marked characteristic of Dutch transnational space is migration. In the past five decades the Netherlands has increasingly become marked by migrations of different kinds involving different groups of migrants, which has put into place another, more complicated configuration where representations of sexualities of different groups of women are relationally pitted against each other. For Surinamese people these migrations are (semi-) permanent, repetitive, and seasonal and they are also connected to old age and ill health. A complete account of the Netherlands in these past five decades includes not only the settlement of postcolonial migrants from its former colonies, Indonesia and Suriname, and the Dutch Antilles, which still are part of the Dutch kingdom, but it also takes account of this space having become a place of settlement for labor migrants from the circum-Mediterranean region, with Turks and Moroccans as the largest groups. Labor migrants from Eastern Europe, too, have increasingly become part of transnational Dutch space. In addition, the Netherlands has also become an anchor point for a miscellaneous "group" of refugees and asylum seekers from Iran, Iraq, and various African and Latin American nations. Overall, migrants make up an estimated 10 percent of the Dutch population of 16 million, but in the four large cities their numbers are more sizable, making up to 50 percent of the cohort in the younger age brackets. Given the subject of this chapter, the sexual globalization of the mati work, I cannot possibly
do justice to the positionings of all these various groups in Dutch society, but the presence of the large female migrant groups—Surinamese, Antillean, Turkish, and Moroccan women—is a significant framework, because of the relational ways in which women's positions on the labor market and in the domain of sexuality are structured, always already taking white Dutch women as the models to be emulated, the teleological endpoints of a desired evolution. I will show which processes of normalization and hierarchization are operative in both domains.

Thus an important prism through which to view sexual globalization can be found in its interfaces with post-World War II migration, especially as it manifests in gendered patterns. Significant work has been done on this topic (Anthias and Lazaridis 2000; Castles and Miller 1998; Kofman et al. 2000; Momsen 1999) and there is consensus on the sheer numbers of women on the move, leading to an understanding in terms of the “feminization of migration.” Due to the deepening chasm in prosperity between the North and the South, female migrants, legal and illegal, are on the move in unprecedented numbers and over ever longer distances, mostly but certainly not exclusively from South to North. To an important extent female migrants from the South have come to specialize in the North in “something that can look very much like love” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002:4; Salazar Parrenas 2001). That is to say that the care sector—child care, care of the elderly, the sick and disabled, house cleaning, cooking—has been transferred from double-burdened middle- and high-income women in the First World to Third World migrant women, after it had become abundantly clear that these care tasks were not going to be shared in any substantive way by their male partners (Wekker 2004). Within the Netherlands, too, as we will see, Afro-Surinamese women have come to fill the vacancies of carer for the sick and the elderly and we will explore in which binaries this division of labor partakes.

I begin this chapter with an elaborate case study of a relationship between two Afro-Surinamese women, Lydia de Vrede and Wonnie Winter, who met at a mati party in Amsterdam shortly after Lydia had migrated to the Netherlands. I will continue to focus on the empirical details of female lives, in which love for other women is central, but I will also pay attention to the political and economical circumstances under which the relationship took shape. I will describe how the relationship was forged, some characteristic patterns in female mati connections, and the way in which the relationship suffered under various internal and external pressures. I will also explore some aspects of the encounter between mati work and lesbianism in the Netherlands and how that encounter turns received notions of "tradition" versus "modernity" inside out, calling the usefulness of that and other binaries into question. In the second half of the chapter the mati work in Suriname and how it is influenced by traveling Northern discourses will take center stage. Throughout the chapter I will engage with theoretical notions that have been influential in thinking about sexual globalization, addressing in what respects my work refuses some of those notions while offering others.

On the Move in Postcolonial Space

I thought life was going to be a brilliant comedy, and that you were to be one of many graceful figures in it. I found it to be a revolting and repellent tragedy.

Wilde 1879 [1897]

Lydia de Vrede, the thirty-seven-year-old nurse's aide and one of my key interlocutors, left Suriname in the beginning of 1993. Her relationship with her husband and the father of her three youngest children had gradually deteriorated. Lydia thought that Raymond had another woman and her main concern was that she was not receiving any financial support from him, barely making ends meet on her own income. She decided, with the help of her siblings who live in the Netherlands, to make a new start.

Two themes surfaced in Lydia's discussions with me during the 1990–1991 period: that a woman be financially independent and therefore not reliant on a man and her desire to have another chance at developing a relationship with a woman. When she was young she never fell in love with men, but, following the dominant heterosexual script, she did what was expected of her. She had many matisma visiti/mati girlfriends and her most ardent dreams were about a particular woman with whom she had been for a short period in her early twenties. This woman had migrated to Holland. With Lydia's own migration, these two recurrent desires got a new purchase on life. Given another chance at love, she would surely choose a woman.

Her oldest children, Fred, nineteen years old, a student at the Faculty of Technical Sciences at the university, and Marylyn, eighteen years, studying at a teacher's training college, would take care of the three youngest children during her absence. The plan was that Lydia would set herself up and then, as she found a job, a permit to stay, or, better yet, Dutch nationality, she would send for the children one by one. Lydia's four siblings in the Netherlands could not put her up but were willing to help her financially through the first period. Between them they had also paid for her ticket, which at NF 2,500 remained an exorbitant amount. She first lived with an aunt in Amsterdam until she found her bearings.

As she had been instructed to do in Paramaribo, Lydia soon found her way to the Albert Cuijp market in Amsterdam, a large all-day open air mar-
ket, which is a significant hub in the Afro-Surinamese network in Amsterdam. The Surinamese market stalls, stores, and the cafés adjacent to the market, are an important entry point or survival circuit, as Saskia Sassen (1998) terms it, for newcomers. These survival circuits have arisen in global cities in response to the deepening crises in the South, linking newcomers to vital information and connections in their new surroundings. At the market Lydia met with old friends and acquaintances and hooked into a network that enabled her to find work as a nurse's aide. Lydia had entered the Netherlands with a tourist visa, which was valid for two months. After that time her stay would become illegal. Initially, she worked under a friend's name for a nursing recruitment agency, specializing in care of the elderly and disabled in their homes.

In taking this job, Lydia was entering a profession in which there was an acute shortage of personnel, a shortage that began in the 1950s and has since accelerated. That acceleration is also racialized and gendered. Many white Dutch women have either left the profession or have found jobs in management, leaving the work floor in many hospitals and nursing homes predominantly to people of color, with Surinamese and Antillean women as nursing personnel, while Turkish and Moroccan men and women serve as cleaners, making beds and serving meals. The top rung of the management ladder is almost exclusively white males. This gendered, racialized picture is a result of the increased recruitment of nursing personnel from Third World countries, particularly South Africa, Indonesia, and the Philippines but also in recent years from Eastern Europe.

Thus, Lydia had no trouble finding a job as a live-in nurse of an ailing octogenarian living by himself in a villa in Amstelveen, a wealthy suburb of Amsterdam. She lived in her own wing of the villa for two years, presiding over the household and the cleaning woman until the old man died. The naturalization of women's work, e.g., nursing, meant Lydia was not well paid, earning a meagre 125 for a twenty-four hour shift in some cases. Surinamese nurses are much appreciated in the Netherlands and for middle- and upper-class people, who can afford the price of private care, they are a godsend. In the wealthy south of Amsterdam and the suburbs surrounding the city, many a Surinamese nurse has found a niche. They perform labor in the privacy of someone's home, being largely invisible to the outside world. Dutch clients see them as reliable, warmhearted, good cooks, and generally possessing traditionally feminized qualities that white Dutch women—so the commonsensical reading goes—have largely discarded in the process of emancipation. This "positive" evaluation of Surinamese nurses and caretakers may also be tied to the perception that linguistically and culturally the Dutch share more with them than with the other large racialized groups, Turkish and Moroccan women. A gendered and ethnicized discourse thus evokes Surinamese nurses as essentially having more "heart" for their charges, being "naturally" good at their work, and simply loving caretaking. As Lydia's choices at a later stage will show, reality is more complicated than the lazy chain of thought embedded within the global imperial would permit. For now it is important to consider some aspects of the powerful juxtaposition that has been put into place and how it reverberates for different groups of women in the postcolonial cultural space of the Netherlands.

In the first place, there is of course no inherent reason why caring qualities should not be distributed evenly across First and Third World cultures—or across men and women. In reality whole cultural edifices have been built upon the qualities attributed to different categories of people. In the same gesture in which Surinamese women with their warmheartedness and respect for the elderly are constructed as essentially different from "modern" white Dutch women, a hierarchy is set up which, according to the standards of the discourse of emancipation, privileges the latter category. During three decades, from the beginning of the seventies, this discourse was powerful in the Netherlands because it embodied official Dutch governmental policy goals. The main goals evolved and changed somewhat during those three decades, but they always included an equal division of labor and care tasks between men and women in the household, a revaluation of feminized qualities and care, and an accelerated entry of women to the labor market. Given the, within a post–WWII European context, exceptionally low labor market participation of Dutch women, their entering the labor market was an important touchstone of emancipation policy. Thus women who from the seventies on entered the labor market were evaluated higher than those women who stayed at home on an imaginary yardstick measuring emancipation. In practice the policy was predicated on the situation of white women (Wekker 1996), since the labor market participation of Afro-Surinamese women, frequently single heads of household, had traditionally been high. Coming from a long line of women who had always worked outside the home, they had been drawn to the Netherlands to forge a better future for themselves and their children. The high labor market participation of Afro-Surinamese (and some other migrant) women went unnoticed for a long time, however, due to a combination of willful "colorblindness," which was reflected in the historically loaded reluctance to collect statistics on the basis of "race" or ethnicity, and to the sheer impossibility of a cultural imaginary that would allow women of color to have higher labor market participation, that now cherished yardstick of emancipation.
In the goals embraced by emancipation policy, i.e., entry of the labor market, an implicit message is sent about traditional, feminized values. They are all well and good and necessary, the message goes, but we do not value them that much that we will pay well for them. Thus "traditional" femininity is placed in the paradoxical situation that it is valued at the same time that it is disparaged. In a sequence of implicit steps, we see an instance of the tradition-modernity opposition in which tradition—warmth, respect, caring—is nostalgically constructed as something that "we," moderns, have lost and "they," colored folks, especially women, still have. It is something that "we" value, that "we" would like an injection of, but that "we" are not prepared to pay well for nor are "we" prepared to do it ourselves. Modernity, understood here as the full capacity to take care of oneself, in a diabolical turn, comes to resemble masculinity, while tradition, standing for femininity, has to a large extent been relegated to Third World women. Instead of the revaluation of qualities that were seen as typically feminine, at the outset of the second feminist wave, we see the desire on the part of middle- and upper-class Western women to abandon those qualities and to share in the "luxuries" of masculinity.

Another point that Arlie Russell Hochschild has developed, with regard to child care in the U.S., is that we should not presuppose that the caregiving capabilities of Third World women are "natural." The argument holds equally well for care for the elderly in a Dutch context:

Their [i.e., Phillipina women] is not an import of happy peasant mothering but a love that partly develops on American shores, informed by an American ideology of mother-child bonding and fostered by intense loneliness and longing for their own children. If love is a precious resource, it is not simply extracted from the Third World and implanted in the First; rather, it owes its very existence to a peculiar cultural alchemy that occurs in the land to which it is imported.

This assessment can be easily transposed to Lydia’s situation. Lydia’s good caretaking skills were not "natural" or genetically placeable. Although there are strong values attached to care for the elderly in a Surinamese context, Lydia made a rational assessment to accept the job. In a situation in which she had few certainties the demand for her nurturing skills brought with it a roof above her head, (scarce) remuneration, a certain measure of autonomy, the opportunity to support her children overseas, and the expectation that with time her legal situation would improve. As she calculated the advantages and disadvantages of the job, she was willing to invest in it. What is tradition here is indeed a bricolage that is assembled on Northern terrain.

In a global, gendered, and racialized division of labor, at the end of the twentieth century, "hands" from the Third World help to alleviate labor shortages in the domain of "love" and care in the First. This division of labor repeats patterns of the colonial era and is firmly situated within Hall’s “Global Imperialism” (1991). In the postcolonial Netherlands we see predominantly dark-skinned women taking care of white, middle-class male and female bodies.

**Meeting Wonnie Winter**

Shortly after her arrival, Lydia met Wonnie Winter at a mati party in Amsterdam. Since the middle of the seventies, the mati work migrated with Creole women, especially to the big cities in the Western part of the country—Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and the Hague—as well as to new satellite cities like Almere, Zoetermeer, and Nieuwegein. As in Paramaribo, women in the Netherlands keep in touch with each other for leisure-time activities, playing bingo, dancing, and flirting with each other, but their networks also support each other financially and socially. Some Afro-Surinamese women supplement their income by organizing mati parties, either at their own homes, on a boat in summer, or in dancing halls, where music, food, and drinks are provided against a fixed price of entry.

Wonnie had lived in Amsterdam since the seventies and had two grown daughters. She augmented her social security income by playing the drums in a band and driving people and small freight in her minivan. Wonnie was attractive, with short wavy hair and, noteworthy in an Afro-Surinamese understanding, light skinned. She made a tough impression and had a reputation in mati circles that she should not be joked around with. Adamant about playing the dominant role in her relationships, she courted Lydia, who at first had misgivings because of Wonnie’s reputation. At the end of their first evening together, Wonnie asked Lydia whether she wanted to have a relationship with her. Lydia needed time to think about it and gave Wonnie her phone number. After a couple of weeks, she agreed to go out with Wonnie on her day off. Lydia was impressed with Wonnie, thought she was *een sterke meid* a strong woman, liked the way she had built a life for herself and her children in the Netherlands, her good physical shape, and the fact that she neither smoked nor drank.

Lydia’s friends were not happy about the way things were developing. The friend who had introduced them to each other cautioned Lydia about starting a relationship with Wonnie. But Lydia gave in after a while, overwhelmed by Wonnie’s ardent professions of love. She moved house from her aunt’s to Wonnie’s.
Wonnie talked more when Lydia was not around and I spoke alone with her several times. She talked about being an adolescent in Paramaribo. Her three older sisters were always after her to get dressed up, to use makeup and to go out. They told her how pretty she was and to wear dresses, but Wonnie always preferred pants. She never liked boys: "They told me how pretty I was and to wear dresses, but Wonnie never liked boys."

Women like Lydia are real women. But me, I always have felt like a man. I used to be a boy, but I always felt like a man."

"Het zit in de geest of je een man bent of een vrouw, je lichaam heeft er niets mee te maken." It is in your spirit whether you are a man or a woman, your body does not have anything to do with it. It is your spiritual guides that determine it. At a party, when a boy would wink an eye at me, I would become very aggressive, furious, but I did not know why.

Growing up, she was withdrawn, shy, she did not have many friends, male or female. She never liked lipstick, nail polish, miniskirts. She preferred to wear long skirts or pants, so that her legs would not show.

She went to Holland at twenty-one. One of the older sisters found a Surinamese man for her. She had a relationship with him because she wanted children. She conceded that he had a lot of patience with her and gave her everything she desired, but her heart was not in the relationship. When her youngest daughter was six months old, he left. Wonnie was twenty-six years old at the time.

She began to socialize in mati circles in Amsterdam and for the first time had a sexual relationship with a woman. She noticed that she responded much more strongly to this woman than she had ever done to the two men in her life. This relationship did not last long, but from that time on Wonnie knew that she wanted to be with a woman:

I was living with a nurse. She was working all the time and I had a lot of time on my hands. At a bingo drive I met another woman who was with a man. They were not living together; he was allowed to visit twice a week and then she did nothing special for him. I went by every day and she would cook special for me all the time. In my experience women give more attention and love to their mati than to their masra. I had nothing to complain about, it was adventurous and I was not jealous, but I would never choose a woman like that. I want to have somebody for myself; I do not want to share. Many women take a man for the eyes of the world and for economic reasons, but they really like women better.

Wonnie had endured many difficulties and disappointments with men and women in her life, yet ultimately she had come out on top. She had accomplished what she wanted to accomplish, having children, financial security, and a relationship with a "feminine" woman. Yet she appeared beleaguered, battling other people's jealousy and their coveting of her belongings: a car, a comfortable house, enough money, and the like. One of her favorite odo was "I am a gold coin ..." which she had internalized and used against the friends who opposed her relationship with Lydia. When I asked Wonnie to tell me what she valued in a partner, she answered:

I like a woman who loves to go out, who dresses in a feminine way, who likes it that she is a woman. A mu' ab' moi skin, literally, "she has to have a nice body," i.e., she has to be robust. Then I feel happy and secure. It does not matter to me whether she has an income or not. "Ef m'e lob' i, dan m'e lob' i?/If I love you, then I love you. We should be able to talk together. I do not like it when one of the partners plays boss. We have to feel equal. I do not like it when she feels small, she has to be at ease in the relationship.

Balancing various discourses, this is an interesting tour de force. Although Wonnie stressed that she liked egalitarianism in the relationship—"We have to feel equal"—her behavior did not support that statement, nor did Wonnie emerge as the champion of egalitarianism from Lydia's narratives about their relationship. She seemed to be professing a dominant article of faith from a white Dutch discourse on lesbianism after the "sexual revolution" (Wekker 1998) in which inequity in relationships, especially in the institutionalized form of butch/femme, was strongly rejected. In my estimation Wonnie's statement pointed to the extent to which mati in the Netherlands, largely for cultural reasons, e.g., her partner should be aware of her spiritual needs and obligations. She explained that for women like her, coveting the "masculine" role in their relationships, the situation in the Netherlands was much better, since they did not have to depend on a man for income. One could either work or depend on a social security income, but one did not have to put up with men. Recalling the attitudes of effective mati/true mati, mati who prefer to be with women, toward men in previous chapters, it is clear that the Netherlands offers more economic opportunities for mati and nonmati alike to be self-supporting than Suriname does. Doing the mati work in the Netherlands, according to Wonnie, was much better than in Suriname anyway. In Holland she felt much freer. Her definition of being free entailed that when the police came to your door, because of a disturbance, you just told them "This is a lovers' quarrel" and they didn't bother you.

Wonnie had endured many difficulties and disappointments with men and women in her life, yet ultimately she had come out on top. She had accomplished what she wanted to accomplish, having children, financial security, and a relationship with a "feminine" woman. Yet she appeared beleaguered, battling other people's jealousy and their coveting of her belongings: a car, a comfortable house, enough money, and the like. One of her favorite odo was "I am a gold coin ..." which she had internalized and used against the friends who opposed her relationship with Lydia. When I asked Wonnie to tell me what she valued in a partner, she answered:

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including those who are playing the dominant role, were exposed to and influenced by that strong discourse of egalitarianism. I was rather intrigued by her statement, because I had never heard *mannengre uma*, literally, “male women,” in Suriname express such a desire.

Later on in the same conversation, Wonnie threw a more illuminating light on her meaning of egalitarianism. She talked about her reactions when somebody asked Lydia to dance at a party:

*I feel defeat when other women ask Lydia to dance. Sometimes they do not even ask me if I allow it. They just go to her and ask her. The other day we were at the market and we were invited to a party, but I knew that some of them were out to challenge me, so we did not go. As we were leaving, one of those bold sharks embraced Lydia, laughing loudly, you know how they do that—ehh-ehh, hands on her hips—she said to me: “Me oren, bika a no mag kowru dyi in a kondre disi? I am holding her, because she should not be cold here, in this country. ‘A man dat’ne koti, a man dat’ na wan hebi trefu gi mi yeey,” literally, “That thing does not cut, it does not go like that; it is a heavy taboo for my ‘I’.**”

Here Wonnie is referencing the world of Winti. The mockery that she felt women were making of her by approaching Lydia and showing Wonnie that she might not be as “strong,” “manly,” and in command as she liked to think she was, was heavily taboo for her yeye. In this case the masculine part of her “I” was insulted and felt defeated because of it. Dancing with a “male” woman’s partner at a party, without first asking the dominant partner for permission is, both in Suriname and in the Netherlands, a serious insult, a blow to her sense of self, her feeling of honor. Dominant women, on the other hand, can dance freely with whomever they want without consulting their partner. Spatially the different roles and entitlements are often expressed by the seating arrangements: the “female” partner is sitting slightly behind her lover, so that it takes an effort to reach her. This spatial arrangement mirrors the ways in which the positioning of male and female Winti is envisioned for the “male” partner.

Underneath the outward call for egalitarianism, which so resembles hegemonic Dutch patterns in same-sex relationships, there is thus an Afro-Surinamese universe that exerts its influence on Wonnie’s behavior. Interestingly, Lydia and Wonnie, although both embedded in Winti, make use of different discourses to understand themselves, each other, and the world. Lydia was always at pains to stress that “yu ab’ den Winti, a no de tak’ den Winti mu ab’ yu” (“you have Winti, but it must not be the case that the Winti have you.” “You must be in control. They [the Winti] should not shame you, they have to listen to you, to protect you. They should not come and shout at all kinds of parties. I have not foregrounded the Winti in my life; I am a believer, but I am not superstitious. I do not allow any Winti to be dominant over me.”

Lydia, having worked in medical circles for years, called on a scientific, biological discourse to explain Wonnie’s behavior: she thought that, unlike her, Wonnie had more male than female hormones. Lydia thus objected to Wonnie’s prerogatives on “wordly” grounds, she simply did not accept that Wonnie should be free to dance with everyone while forbidding her from doing the same. Wonnie, on the other hand, understood her own behavior in terms of spiritual notions that put egalitarianism beyond her control. It was the male part of her self, her Apuku, that behaved in this way and that wanted to control Lydia. “With me, *Apuku e krap’ na fesili* Apuku, the male principle, stands in front. I cannot stand to be with another "male" woman. You can immediately see it when in a woman *a man tan na fesii* the man stands in front; it is what she exudes.”

This elaborate exegesis of what is involved in egalitarianism for either of the partners shows that their cultural differences, even though they are both embedded within the same Afro-Surinamese working-class women’s culture, can be quite substantial. In addition to being a warning against homogenizing mati, there is another point to be made. Extrapolating on the cultural homogenization thesis that is still too prominent in studies of sexual globalization, one would assume that globalization unidirectionally leads to the spread of lesbian identity. Thus, it would be reasonable to expect that it is Wonnie, having been in the Netherlands for almost thirty years and thus more thoroughly exposed to lesbianism as the model of same-sex desire, who would take egalitarianism most seriously. In fact, it is precisely the other way around, which amounts to a serious interruption of the tradition-modernity binary in the field of same-sex sexuality.

**Visiting Suriname**

One collective interview took place at Wonnie’s home, shortly after Lydia and Wonnie had returned from a visit to Lydia’s children in Suriname in the winter of 1994. Lydia reflected on the differences between being with a female partner in the Netherlands and in Suriname. In Amsterdam nobody paid attention to your business. In Suriname being with a woman was accepted, as long as you did not talk about it, did not name yourself. They went to several mati and other working-class parties together and, without words, presented themselves as a couple. They did not meet with negative reactions.
If it had been up to Wonnie, she would have preferred not to talk about their relationship at all with Lydia's children. Lydia, on the other hand, felt that because the children had only known their mother in a relationship with a man, they should know about the nature of her connection with Wonnie. Lydia had not exactly been looking forward to the conversation and explained how she talked with them:

I sat down with the eldest two and I explained: ik heb een vriendin\(^{11}\) gevonden/I have found a friend and she means everything to me. Marylyn asked, "Does Aunt Wonnie have a husband?" I said no. Marylyn then said, "You know what you are doing. You went through a lot with Raymond and you deserve a little happiness. So I won't talk back to you. But make sure that you pay Aunt Wonnie back everything that she gave you." "Mi n'e kon leg den uit dat' Wonnie na mi bedvriendin, dat' m'e seks en?/I did not explain to them that Wonnie is my "bedfriend," that I have sex with her. Then my boy Fred asked, "Do you live in one house?" I said, "Yes, and we sleep in one bed." Fred, "Don't you want to take Raymond back? Has she taken his place?" I said yes, Wonnie has taken his place. In the end they both agreed that Aunt Wonnie must love me a lot, to take me with all my children.

The children's words, veiled as they are, revealed that they understood that their mother's relationship with Wonnie was more than just an ordinary friendship. No one named the relationship, but everyone understood what it was. Even Lydia's grandmother, who had raised her and who had done the mati work all of her life, was offered an ambiguous definition of the situation. Lydia told her: "Ouma, mi fen' wan vriendin" /Grandma, I have found a friend. Grandma responded: "Meisje, komopo na mi tapu, yere. Mi na sokiman, soki smeri no kan kor' mi."/Girl, leave me alone. "I know one, when I see one,"\(^{12}\)

Lydia told her siblings in the Netherlands that Wonnie was her partner. With that "Dutch" directness, she might be locating herself within the preferred Dutch gay and lesbian model of psychosexual development: struggling with one's homosexual identity, finding a new equilibrium, and then redefining one's relationship with the self in a way that white women would want to emulate. I situate this impossibility, again, firmly in the realm of the global imperial.

I do not automatically escape this powerful global imperial narrative. In this conversation I heard Lydia for the first time calling herself alternately "a bisexual woman" and "a lesbian." I noted it with a slight pang of my own version of anthropological nostalgia (Rosaldo 1993) for the mati work. Although it would be an essentialist gesture to equate the childbearing possibilities, e.g., the mati work thriving in the Netherlands and white Dutch women adopting sexual and familial patterns that have long been part of the behavioral repertoire of Surinamese women, hardly seem worth considering. Although it would be an essentialist gesture to equate the childbearing patterns in the Afro-Surinamese and white Dutch same-sex communities, and research needs to be done about the confluence of these patterns, it is worth noting that in the past two decades single motherhood and children born in lesbian relationships among white women have increased. Yet in binarist teleologic "tradition," that is, the mati work is still equated with backwardness and "modernity," that is, lesbianism, in its exclusionary variety, with progress/civilization (cf. Shohat 1998). As we saw earlier with the governmental discourse of emancipation policy, which has white women as its implicit subject, it is oxymoronic, not part of the cultural imaginary, to suppose that Surinamese women could organize their procreational patterns in a way that white women would want to emulate. I situate this impossibility, again, firmly in the realm of the global imperial.

Each of the contexts. It is indicative of her astute and multifaceted behavioral repertoire, which depended on context. While the openness toward the Dutch siblings might be understood by the influence that her stay in the Netherlands was exerting, Lydia said that she felt closer to them, and, had they been in Suriname, she would have told them there too. Lydia thus again made assessments and exhibited behavior that contradicts an easy and pervasive Euro-American narrative that makes teleological assumptions about the direction of change in sexual configurations. Thus, the lazy tradition-modernity reading would have it that exposure to the "modern" model of same-sex relationships in the West results in mati taking over features of the lesbian identity construction or even the whole package. In this case it would entail Lydia's automatic coming out to her family, especially the ones in the Netherlands. And while she did tell them, she located the reasons in the quality of her relationships with them in deciding to tell them about her relationship with Wonnie. The disappearance of the mati work in the Netherlands, once Surinamese women are exposed to lesbianism, is part of the grand narrative of the tradition-modernity template too, while other possibilities, e.g., the mati work thriving in the Netherlands and white Dutch women adopting sexual and familial patterns that have long been part of the behavioral repertoire of Surinamese women, hardly seem worth considering.
Dutch same-sex relational patterns are conceptualized, signaling activity and identity respectively. Lydia did not share my nostalgia; in fact she now felt that maati should make an exclusive choice for women and discontinue keeping various options open. I realized that my (imperial) nostalgia is an emotional and intellectual investment in the maati work, which entailed that she should hold on to the maati work and not claim lesbianism. My feeling denied her the possibility of naming herself situationally and contextually, which is so deeply ingrained in working-class culture, and, as I have claimed in chapter 3, resembles the fragmented self postulated under the global postmodern, while it is not to be equated with it. To the extent that Lydia spoke about herself in terms of a lesbian identity, it could as convincingly be interpreted as practicing situational multiplicitousness. On the other hand, in my desire for Lydia to think about herself as doing the maati work, I was also freezing and essentializing the concept of lesbianism, precluding the possibility that lesbianism will be infused with other meanings when new groups claim the term.

Cracks

Gradually tiny cracks began to accumulate in the relationship between Lydia and Wonnie. In the spring of 1995, in an individual interview, Lydia shared that there were certain aspects of Wonnie that she could not accept, i.e., her manlike behavior. Now that Lydia had finally made an exclusive choice for a woman, she could not accept it that Wonnie behaved like a man. Wonnie, as we have seen, modeled her behavior after the masculine pattern that is characteristic in the domain of male-female relationships. It bothered Lydia that Wonnie was always telling her what to do and was extremely controlling of where she went, whom she met, and at what time she came home. Wonnie also resorted to physical violence when she was angry.

In one conversation Lydia coined a significant new phrase in a mixture of Standard Dutch and Surinamese Dutch. She said that she knew that there are relationships where "twee vrouwen beiden van het lesbisch werk houden"/two women both love the lesbian work, but both behave in a feminine way. This is an interesting turn of phrase, where Lydia translated and transposed the Sranan Tongo expression a maati wroko/the maati work, into Dutch; she coined a new phrase by saying "to love the lesbian work," showing the mixing and matching between two different models of same-sex desire. She illustrated, in fact, the ways in which lesbianism could be infused with new meaning, holding on—in the new formulation—to the mutual obligations implied by "work."

The four of us—Lydia and Wonnie, Delani and I—sometimes went to parties together. At one such party, in the winter of 1995, Lydia danced with another woman and Wonnie had been livid. She stopped talking to us, making it clear that we were to leave immediately and the party was over. On the way back home, with Delani and I sitting in the back, Wonnie threatened to hit Lydia, so Delani and I got out too. All of us were now standing along the freeway between the southeast of Amsterdam and the center at three in the morning. It was bitterly cold, cotton clouds were forming out of our mouths, and shards of mist were chasing each other in the dull orange-yellow light. Wonnie wanted to know what Lydia had been thinking to dance with Norine, when Norine had not asked Wonnie for permission. It was clear that Lydia had committed a serious transgression. In a mixture of Sranan Tongo and Dutch, Wonnie yelled at Lydia, pushing her around:

_I do not tolerate it when other women dance with you. Then they don't ask me anything. You know how those vulgar folks, those trashy women will talk: vers-vers-vers/fresh-fresh-fresh. "Me dans’ en kiri, yongu, a ’er nyan”/I danced the hell out of her, man, [I felt] her whole pussy!! It is to ridicule me. They don’t show any respect to me._

With vers-vers-vers Wonnie was making a reference to the salient observation in maati circles that someone has just arrived from Suriname. The maligned maati were saying: _Wonnie fanga vers/Wonnie has caught (a) fresh (one), thereby expressing a certain respect for Wonnie, while they were at the same time testing and challenging her to see if she was really sure of her conquest. It is a sport among some maati to make physical contact with the newly arrived woman while dancing with her._

There are at least three levels of meaning attached to the expression vers-vers-vers. It is, first, often used as an advertisement on Surinamese stores and in newspaper ads to advertise fresh merchandise, especially meat. The not so subtle association between a newly arrived maati and meat bespeaks a heteromasculine worldview, also being deployed by maati. Second, a prevalent discourse in these circles is that a newly arrived maati is highly desirable because she has traditional values, such as being hospitable, a good cook, and having bun manirilgood manners, and has not yet been spoiled by becoming materialistic. Thus newly arrived women are more appreciated than women who have lived in the Netherlands for a longer time. The tradition-undesirability versus modernity-desirability binary shows up here again, but in reverse: maati in the Netherlands often prefer women who have just arrived from Suriname,
bespeaking a preference for “tradition.” Third, simultaneously, there is a construction operative, in which the newly arrived mati and women in Suriname are rendered desirable objects and are thus feminized, while the implicit subject imagining what and who is desirable has agency and is masculinized. I am arguing that, exceptions notwithstanding, newly arrived mati often find themselves structurally in a situation of economic, emotional, and psychological dependency, needing knowledge of the local situation possessed by their partners. This situation is exacerbated by the demand of the Dutch state to remain with that partner for three years in order to get a permit to stay, which sets up a division of labor whereby “Dutch” mati are positioned in ways that are comparable to a masculine position, while newly arrived mati are symbolically positioned as feminine. Unfortunately, there is more than one parallel here with the situation of white European and U.S. males seeking mail-order brides from Thailand, the Philippines, or Eastern Europe. M. Jacqui Alexander (1998) has proposed to think about as equal partners in a sexual exchange. Her model of transnational sexual consumption is grounded in a “historically intransigent colonial relationship, in which a previously scripted colonial cartography of ownership and production, consumption and distribution all conform to a ‘First World/Third World’ division” (1998:294). Unequal sexual exchanges are not only located in a North-South context, they clearly also take place in settings, where both participants are from the South.

Returning to the desolate scene described above, several readings of Wonnie’s outburst that do not mutually exclude each other are possible. First, there is the Surinamese cultural context in which her masculine spirits were put into jeopardy by Lydia’s behavior. Second, Wonnie’s outburst can also be read as an expression of the indignation she felt at the trespass Lydia had made on the unwritten rules of the contract between them, in which, backed by the Dutch state, she occupied the privileged, masculine position. Lydia tried to calm Wonnie down, giggling, obviously embarrassed that Wonnie would give her anger such free expression in our presence. We tried without much success to intervene. After a while, her worst anger subsided and all of us climbed back into the van. We got home that evening, feeling, needless to say, very uncomfortable.

**Things Fall Apart**

The next time Lydia and Wonnie came over for dinner, the tension was so rife it was unpleasant to be with them. It became difficult to find topics of conversation that were not sensitive. Several times Lydia offhandedly made remarks about starting a relationship without knowledge of the other person: “We zijn doodvreemden voor elkaar”/We are complete strangers to each other. Wonnie, as usual did not comment, but she looked like a rumbling volcano. Somewhat later Lydia told me on the phone that Wonnie was threatening to go to the police and tell them that the relationship was over. That would mean that Lydia’s grounds for staying in the Netherlands and for getting Dutch nationality would be nonexistent. She would either be forced to leave the Netherlands or become illegal again.

Shortly after, I accidentally met Wonnie at the opening of a Surinamese art gallery, where her band was playing. During intermissions we chatted. Wonnie indicated that things were falling apart. In her view she had made all the right moves to keep Lydia happy; she had helped her get on her feet in the Netherlands, had given her everything she might desire. She felt righteous about her expectation that Lydia would stay at home when she was not working or that they would go out only together. Wonnie suspected that Lydia had started seeing someone else since she often came home late, unable and unwilling to account for it. Wonnie was bitter that Lydia a’e waka en eygi pasi was doing her own thing, after she had helped her get her permit to stay. “She goes her way and I go mine.”

At the next intermission I heard that Lydia had moved out and I was jolted. When I ran into Diana, Lydia’s niece, in the shopping center, she told me that Lydia moved out because Wonnie had become violent toward her. Lydia had to move out surreptitiously, on an evening when Wonnie was playing with her band. She left a note for Wonnie saying that it was better to be apart. She announced in the note that she would send her brother to get the rest of her stuff in the coming week. When he went to get her possessions, Wonnie had, in a symbolically charged gesture that is not uncommon in male-female dyads, destroyed all her possessions, clothes, books, and photographs.

**Epilogue**

Gradually, Lydia picked up her life again. She was lucky to be so close to the mandatory three-year period that she obtained her own permit to stay in the Netherlands and, after a while, Dutch nationality. She retrained as a subway driver, became active in the union of municipal transport workers, and rented her own apartment. By first “choosing” a profession that would allow her to stay in the Netherlands and obtain Dutch nationality and then retraining for another job that she really wanted, Lydia showed characteristic agency and strategic planning. In becoming a subway driver, she poked her nose at
the prevalent construction of Surinamese women as proverbial caretakers who simply and naturally love the work. She has brought her three youngest children over to the Netherlands. The eldest children chose to stay in Paramaribo. Lydia became very careful in relationships. Recently she started seeing an older Afro-Surinamese woman who is "very soft and very feminine." She has finally found the relationship she had been dreaming about, and they both preferred a visiting relationship.

The relationship between Lydia and Wonnie did not work out. It combined some of the worst features, jealousy and violence, that mati relationships can harbor. The deepest source of conflict, internal to the relationship, were the different ways in which the partners envisioned their roles.

But the relationship did not proceed in a vacuum. It suffered severely from the legal circumstances that position migrant partners as dependent, adding features to the relationship, which may be structural to transnational sexual exchanges generally, setting up "Third World" partners as feminized objects and "First World" partners as masculinized agents. There are several observations that need to be made here.

While this relationship had some extreme features, it should not be taken as the typical outcome of transatlantic mati relationships. The broadest framework in which I have placed it is that of sexual globalization, in which the mati work travels transatlantically. This was facilitated by cultural changes and legal battles in the Netherlands, during the eighties and nineties, that resulted in the recognition of homosexual and lesbian relationships as a valid basis to form partnerships and thus enabled same-sex partners to form recognized unions. The "Dutch" partner has to meet certain housing, income, and age requirements, which have shown the tendency in recent years, under the Centrum-Right cabinets Balkenende I and II (from 2002 on), to become ever stricter. Lydia and Wonnie's relationship was made possible by this legislation. Although at first sight this progressive state gesture only knows winners, there are price tags attached to it. It is clear that the construction of lesbianism, which stresses a stable sexual identity as the legal ground enabling entry into the Netherlands, exerts influence on those who stand to benefit from it, hailing them to embrace that identity. Thus it need not surprise us that Lydia felt interpellated by the discourse consciousness, subjectivity and global modernity.

One consequence of the dominant discourse acting as a borderguard is that it homogenizes all those engaging in same-sex sexual activity, leaving no conceptual space for alternative conceptualizations of sexual subjectivity. In the apt words of Cruz-Malave and Manalansan IV:

While globalization is seen to liberate and promote local sexual difference, the emergence, visibility, and legibility of those differences are often predicated in globalizing discourses on a developmental narrative in which a premodern, prepolitical, non-Euro-American queerness must consciously assume the burdens of representing itself to itself and others as "gay" in order to attain political consciousness, subjectivity and global modernity.

This is a powerful critique of the "fixing" of gay and lesbian identity as the only possible, viable, and respectable mode of same-sex desire. Various authors have recently embarked upon this critical route, which breaks through received notions constructing sexual globalization (Gopinath 2002; Strongman 2002; Santiago 2002).

Wonnie's and Lydia's union showed the extreme dependency in which the newly arrived partner is structurally placed. Helma Lutz (1997) has rightly pointed to the double standards that white Dutch women, i.e., "autochthonous" women, and women arriving in the Netherlands from particular Third World countries, so-called allochthonous women, are held to. "General" policy aims, in the framework of governmental emancipation policy during the past thirty years, have, as we saw, been geared toward financial independence and autonomy, supposedly for all women. In practice, "allochthonous" women are tightly bound, at least for three years, to their (homo- or heterosexual) partners who already are in the Netherlands. The emancipation goal of autonomy and independence for all women is thus set aside, for newly arrived women of color, in the service of the more pressing goal of keeping their numbers limited and their not becoming dependent for income on the state.

The dependency on a partner causes untold misery should the relationship fail. Lydia initially was extremely dependent on Wonnie for money, for housing, for her permit to stay, for her naturalization papers, for knowledge about Dutch society. This dependency should not be underestimated. That power differential, clothed in love in the beginning, must have surely convinced Wonnie even more that she was the "man in the house." As Lydia's dependence diminished over time, Wonnie's demanding behavior, backed by the law, as it were, grew more excessive.

Second, although Wonnie had been in the Netherlands for decades, she modeled her behavior after traditional male Surinamese patterns. She felt entitled to control Lydia's comings and goings. It also meant that she believed she had claims over Lydia's sexuality. Not taking a claim would amount to an insult to her "I" and a blemish to her reputation. Lydia, on the other hand, "fresh from Suriname" had other ideas about how they should interact. She had left her husband because she wanted a more egalitarian relationship, but with Wonnie she found herself in a situation that resembled the one with
her husband. Lydia and Wonnie break through lazy, Eurocentric juxtapositions that would have Wonnie, having been in the Netherlands for decades, be more "progressive," liberated, and egalitarian and Lydia more "traditional," old-fashioned, and into polarized role-playing. They demonstrated exactly opposite behaviors from those expectations. Lydia and Wonnie called on various discourses to make sense of themselves and the world. Lydia called predominantly on a biological discourse, which utilizes hormones as a key to understanding behavior, and Wonnie made use of a Winti discourse, which foregrounds the Gods and spirits who have particular—masculine and feminine—characteristics. Again, the correlation of being embedded in one or the other discourse with the length of one's stay in the Netherlands is not clear-cut at all. Reality is much messier. Moreover, the same person may make use of different discourses, either in the same utterance or at different moments.

Third, when addressing the ways in which female mati insert themselves in sexual globalization, it is striking that they, generally, meet in person, through mati networks in the big cities in the Netherlands or in Paramaribo. Mati networks in the Netherlands engage in leisure time activities, playing bingo, dancing, and flirting with each other, but their networks also support each other financially and socially. Typically, relationships are forged between Afro-Surinamese women, although relationships with Javanese and Hindustani women also occur. Relationships with women from other ethnicized groups, including white Dutch women, are rare. The personal way of meeting and the preference for a woman from one's own community compose a specific configuration. It may be a matter of generation and class. The women I have worked with, who are "on the move" transatlantically, are at least in their thirties and working class. There is another factor that may contribute to the widespread preference for a relationship with another Afro-Surinamese woman. It is my impression that, for large numbers of older working-class Surinamese men and women in the big cities in the Netherlands, social life unfolds and takes place largely within the Afro-Surinamese community. My observations at parties and ritual gatherings in the southeast of Amsterdam, where a significant section of Surinamese Amsterdammers lives, show that there are only rarely people of other ethnic groups present. This holds both for general and for mati gatherings. People may go to work in white or multiethnic settings, but their leisure time is spent in Afro-Surinamese circles. Mati I have interviewed in Amsterdam confirmed that they preferred, for a variety of reasons, to be in a relationship with another Afro-Surinamese woman, and this pattern was also obvious in Suriname. Some of the reasons, as we have already seen in Wonnie's case, are located in the cultural domain: it is more comfortable not having to explain one's cultural do's and don'ts, e.g., observing one's trefu/food that is ritually taboo, or the nature of the spirits one is carried by and thus the obligations one has to honor, or how one should be treated. Another set of reasons that surfaced had to do with differences in perceived standards of cleanliness, pertaining mostly to care for the body, when one has a white Dutch partner. Several mati observed that their first preference was to be with a Creole woman, next would be a Hindustani or Javanese partner, and they could not quite imagine being with a white Dutch partner. The third set of reasons reported is a positive preference to be with a black woman, because they are thought to be aesthetically and sexually most pleasing. The firm orientation of many mati, like Wonnie, who have been in the Netherlands for quite some time on the Afro-Surinamese community may result in ossified attitudes, beliefs, and practices in the same-sex relational domain than those more recent arrivals, like Lydia, exhibit. As I noted, this overturns the tradition-modernity binary.

Globalization offers opportunities, but it also exacerbates existing inequalities between the North and the South. There is a misplaced light-heartedness connected to the triumphal march of "global queering" that is at odds with the realities experienced by women like Lydia. Lydia was "looking for her life," needing to survive and build a new home for herself and her children. Given the conditions of Fortress Europe, these opportunities come at a price, e.g., personal dependencies and reinscriptions of colonial scripts, no matter what the actual ethnicized positionings of the protagonists involved are. We should not underestimate the real, enormous difficulties that partners have to deal with in a Western setting, which is desperately set to limit the entry of immigrants from Third World countries, even if they can show they are card-carrying members of the "lesbian community" (Espin 1999).

**Contemporary Hegemonic Scripts About Black Women's Sexuality**

While Lydia and Wonnie were in the process of getting acquainted, the presence of black sexualities in Dutch society did not go unnoticed. De Volkskrant, one of the large national daily newspapers, published a column on March 15, 1993, entitled "White in the Bijlmer," written by white female journalist Bernadette de Wit. In this column another white woman, Pamela, living in the Bijlmermeer, was given the opportunity to vent her opinions about Surinamese people in general and Surinamese women's sexuality in
particular. The Bijlmer is the southeastern part of Amsterdam where a large section of the population is black, with people from Suriname, the Antilles, and various African nations. I will critically analyze this column, because de Volkskrant is an influential daily reaching a large, highly educated white readership, many of whom most likely have never set foot in the Bijlmer. The column informed them about black women's sexuality. Pamela had lived with a Surinamese man for fifteen years and he had just left her for a Surinamese woman. She had a child with him, thus her biography lent her the status of reliable witness:

"I am not a racist. I do not feel at home with my own people either, with my colored children. The dirty remarks I have had because of that: I am a negro whore. I have asked for a house in another part of Amsterdam, because I want to leave the Bijlmer. For my child. You want me to tell you something funny? I am sure that I will get homesick."

Pamela's trustworthiness and her right to speak as an "experiential expert" are established in this passage. The opening phrase "I am not a racist" functions as a transparent opening bid, with her colored child as the proof of her trustworthiness and thus a license for all statements that are to follow in the interview. Her ambivalence both toward "her own people," who call her a negro whore, and toward the Surinamese group, from whom she wants to distance herself but whom she will miss in the future, heighten her authenticity: here we are dealing with an in-your-face, real Amsterdam woman who tells it like it is. With respect to both groups she presents herself as half insider/half outsider. This strategy allows the reader to get the impression that her multiple "marginality" gives her privileged insight. Pamela is allowed to say everything about Surinamers that she wants—"they will never integrate," "divide and rule is the only thing they know," "that hatred against us, they imbibe it with their mother's milk"—after all, she has already established that she is not a racist.

Her statements about black women's sexuality are especially significant. They are statements in a long historical tradition of white women constructing black women's sexuality. The strategies Pamela uses to other black women, while in the same movement establishing white women as the universal, normative, essential subject, are my focus here. Pamela informs us about the nature of Surinamese people:

"Everything that Surinamese people do is calculated. You only hit the sack with him when he pays for your food. You take a child and then, on top of your social security and the child allowance, you get another \( \text{nf} \) 500, from

Pamela produces an utterly pejorative reading of Afro-Surinamese working-class sexual configurations here. While some of the ingredients that I have outlined earlier in this book are present, the umbrella under which everything is put is one of rejection and negativity toward the sexualized Other, while it is entirely clear that the sexual systems of the white Self are superior. What is striking, first, about this statement is Pamela's certainty about the general validity of the model she offers for understanding Surinamese people: "Everything that Surinamese people do is calculated; this is the way all Surinamese women do it; they are all bi." According to Mohanty (1991), colonization almost invariably entails the often violent suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject in question. Pamela is exercising discursive power by her litany and is constructing a homogeneous, inferior black Other by implicitly taking herself and other white women as another homogeneous frame of reference. White Dutch women, in Pamela's subtext, are obviously totally different from Surinamese women: they have sex with men out of love or, in circles where that is allowed since the Sexual Revolution, out of desire. Calculation and greed are not a part of this discourse.

Second, reading in between the lines it is clear that several assumptions about normative, white female sexuality are operative. I will comment on three characteristics of that sexuality as they become clear in Pamela's words. In the first place, where Surinamese women "take it for granted that he has two, three other women on the side," we have to assume that white women would not stand for that. Here an implicit self-image of white women is constructed: she is free to take decisions, in control of her own sexuality and her own body. Moreover, white women are capable of regulating the sexuality of their men. Here it is still ambiguous whether black women do not want to do the same (too emancipated) or are not capable of doing so (too unemancipated). Whatever it will turn out to be, it is clear that it is no good. In the chiaroscuro of white and black sexuality, we see the contours of monogamy between white heterosexual couples as the normal and normative state of affairs. In the second place, black female sexuality is depicted as excessive, as far too much. That Surinamese men have multiple partners is one thing, but Surinamese women too walk "where their cunts lead them." Thus it becomes clear that the women do not want to control the sexuality of their men. Subtext: this is not the way white Dutch women are. Despite the widespread notion that white female sexuality is the apex of self-determination and autonomy, apparently there
are implicit, self-regulating norms that keep it in check. Black women, so Pamela is implying, are not the least bit interested in abiding by those norms. Sexual freedom is good, according to her, but when you take too much of it—"walking where their cunts lead them"—a woman places herself outside the norms of respectability. In the third place, picking up on Pamela’s statement that "they are all bi," it transpires that bisexuality cannot count on her approval. It transgresses the boundaries of acceptable white female sexuality. Subtext: normative white female sexuality is heterosexual, predictable, fixed on a partner of the opposite sex. The "naturalized" sexuality that Pamela is implicitly referring to all the time and that enables her to reject the sexuality of Surinamese women is thus monogamous, heterosexual, not excessive, and not calculated.

Finally, the statement lacks any kind of consciousness of the historical and cultural context. Representations of black women’s sexuality did not spring up overnight: they are part of a deeply rooted texture of excessiveness, exoticism, deviance, and pathology (Nederveen Pieterse 1990). Representational regimes of the sexuality of different groups of women do not come into being independently from each other; they are relational. In contemporary Dutch multiethnic society, Islamic women are represented as sexually backward and oppressed, while Afro-Surinamese women are "too liberated," with a rampant sexuality, doing it indiscriminately with men and with women, doing it for money, "walking after their cunts." White female sexuality is the only decent, normative variety. Thus we see not only a relational structuring of these representations but also an operative hierarchy. Moreover, dominant representational regimes of Islamic women in the West have undergone radical changes from hypersexuality, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to current asexuality (Lutz 1991). But the sexual imagery constructing black women shows more continuity, paradoxically containing elements of desirability and abject otherness. Within racist discourse blacks are not exclusively depicted as inferior; there is also, and often simultaneously, jealousy, an unspeakable yearning, involved (hooks 1992).

Thus in everyday discourse in Dutch society, which insists on being non-racist, images of black female sexuality are recirculated that ensure the continuing operation of the global imperial.

In Pamela’s bitterly racist words, she transforms the threat and the hurt that she must feel at being abandoned in the familiar tradition (Surinamese sexual culture) versus modernity (white Dutch sexual culture) binary. Evidently her sense of self has been so challenged that she must resort to racist imagery to shore up her self esteem. One cannot help but wonder what it will do to her children to hear their mother rant in such a way about half their family. White female sexual subjecthood, too, is interrogated under the influence of sexual globalization. It has to resort to violent measures to hold on to its superior positioning.

The Mati Work in Suriname and Sexual Globalization

Thus far I have paid attention to how the mati work reinvents itself in a Dutch postcolonial space that is severely marred by a reluctance to address its colonial past and racist present. I now want to address some of the ways in which globalization makes itself felt in discourses on sexuality and on the mati work in Suriname.

I will briefly sum up the contexts in which sexual globalization in a female same-sex formation took place at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. The globalization of the mati work occurred in the context of and was produced by the displacement of old economic forms—that is, ever deepening spirals of economic crises, running inflation (Kromhout 2000), a state that had evacuated important tasks in the domains of care and education, and the supersession of national industries—glass, soap, building material, preserves, and juice—by transnational corporations extracting wood and gold. The rain forest, once a promise for an ecologically sound habitat, looked, at the end of the nineties, like a fragile and poisonous set of dentures from which so many teeth have been extracted. These conditions made it virtually impossible for the majority of the population, notably women who are single heads of households, to survive without access to foreign currencies. Many younger women migrated to the Netherlands and, in one case, to the U.S. Connections with resources outside of Suriname were vital social, economic, and erotic capital.

Politically, we saw the dislodgment of old political forms—that is, the nominal replacement of a dictatorship by a civilian government in the nineties—while in practice an almost inextricable nexus of political, military and commercial interests, the so-called Tarantulas, which had aligned themselves with transnational corporations, ruled the state. Politics orchestrated the resources of various sectors of the population in gendered ways, with women in structurally less favorable positions than men. From above we saw the influence of multinational corporations and transnational bodies (the UN, the World Bank, and the IMF, but also the international women’s and indigenous rights movements) impinging on the state, whereas, from below, the state is challenged by a diverse array of forces: NGOs in the fields of women’s and indigenous rights, trade unions incessantly demanding higher wages, unknown numbers of immigrants from mainland China...
and an estimated forty thousand Brazilian garimpeiros, gold diggers, pointing to the unwillingness or inability of the state to police its borders.

At the most general level global cultural forces, i.e., the international women's movement and donor organizations like Dutch Cordaid, Novib, Mama Cash, Unifem and Unicef, the Canadian Fund for Gender Equity, and the Global Fund for Women have increasingly impacted on the gender and sexual landscape in Suriname. In the nineties and the early years of the twenty-first century the Surinamese women's and NGO movements have, with the help of these foreign donors, flourished and became more visible. This is an aspect of globalization that has recently started to receive attention in the literature (Cruz-Malave and Manalansan IV 2002; King 2002). The women's movement has, among other targets, focused on domestic violence (Ketwaru-Nurmohamed 2000:68). Violent acts of men against women received widespread coverage in the media in 2001. In Foucauldian fashion a discourse was forged between international donors and Surinamese women's organizations in which sexual violence, which had been around for a long time—recall Mis' Juliette's narrative about the sexual harassment she faced in the homes where she worked in the 1920s—could now for the first time be discussed in the public sphere. The newspapers in May and June 2001 brought an avalanche of cases of violence against women (Weker 2001, 2004b). The framework is still that of a dominant, unequal gender ideology, so justice is not necessarily served in these court cases, but at least and that men can be held accountable.

There are other issues the women's movement has put on the public agenda in the past decade that have impacted on the lives of all women, including mati, and men: commercial sex work, HIV/AIDS, sustainable livelihoods for women in the interior, broader representation of women in politics, training of female entrepreneurs and women in nontraditional occupations, provision of schooling and care for teenage mothers and their infants. In 2000 a report was published by the Maxi Linder Foundation in collaboration with the Canadian Gender Equity Fund, that charted the nature and extent of the sex industry in Suriname. Strikingly, for a small population of 440,000 people, 35 registered sex clubs were counted as well as 150 informal locations where sex was transacted. While sex work is illegal in Suriname, it is tolerated, and the foundation had registered 248 street workers and another 500 workers, mostly from Columbia, Guyana, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic, who worked in the club circuit. As noted in chapter 2, it transpired that male sex workers are very popular and were able to charge higher rates for the same acts that women perform. For example, for a whole day or evening a female sex worker could ask between sf. 40,000 and 60,000 while a male prostitute could charge between sf. 60,000 and 100,000. Several sources confirm that male same-sex sexual behavior is hidden but rampant. M. Jacqui Alexander's (1991, 1994) argument that the neocolonial Caribbean state, i.e., Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas, has a lot of interest in constructing some bodies as citizens while others—gays, lesbians, and prostitutes—are constructed as not being part of the nation, as a threat to the continuity of the nation by supposedly being nonprocreative, holds only partly in Suriname. While the Surinamese state naturalizes and tries to enforce compulsory heterosexuality for men, mainly by ridiculing and animalizing male homosexuals in public debates and speeches, it has mainly ignored female mati, who are not in the habit of naming themselves. It remains to be seen how the state responds when young, educated women start to call themselves lesbian in public.

On a more personal level, the uneven economic circumstances, which were exacerbated by globalization, were intimate felt in the relationships between mati who are differently positioned on either side of the Atlantic. In chapter 5, on the mati work, I described how some mati, like Maureen Gonzalez, were able to establish a satisfactory long-distance relationship with a woman in the Netherlands. On the other hand, in the beginning of the nineties the stronger financial situation of "Dutch" mati, who were visiting Suriname, sharply brought their privileges and the more precarious situation of Surinamese mati into focus. Many Surinamese mati felt that the "Dutch girls" sought to humiliate vulnerable Surinamese mati, who were tempted by their money to engage in compromising sexual encounters.

In the summer of 2001 globalization presented itself forcefully when I attended the funeral of a well-known mati who was in her late sixties. Prominent at the funeral were her male concubine and her mati, both resident in Paramaribo, and several female friends, her speripiers, who had traveled from the Netherlands, some of whom were her ex-mati. The funeral was spectacular, because all the women wore the same color dresses and hats: a light beige. With this old parweri/wearing-the-same-outfit statement, they stressed their belonging together. In another symbolically charged gesture, droves of white doves and balloons were sent into the air. This event was special, because of the sheer numbers of people attending the funeral and the mixture of symbols that was invoked. The transnational character of the Surinamese community spoke loudly from the event: the deceased had, like many other retired Surinamese people, lived alternately in Suriname and with her children in the Netherlands in the last decades of her life. The balloons and doves were gestures from a Dutch cultural universe, symbolizing the space of freedom that the deceased was now entering, and the fabric of the dresses had come from the Netherlands as well. The presence of her two
partners and the practice of parweri bespoke a Surinamese universe. The contours of a global mati funeral were transparent in the mixture.

I also spent time with two different sets of young women: a group of university students, in their middle twenties, and several mati couples who were in their twenties and thirties. I was struck, first, by the adoption of northern sexual labels by the educated young women and, second, by the continuity of the pattern of gendered roles among both sets of women. As far as the division of roles was concerned, the only young couple in the middle-class crowd, a school teacher and a sales representative in the electronics department of a large shopping mall, self-identified as lesbian and clearly were into a division of roles. Ethnically, one of them was moksi, or, as young people also say nowadays, a "cocktail"—mixed—while the other one was a Hindustani girl, pointing to the purchase that the mati model has on girls and women of other ethnic groups. They dressed in a polarized "feminine" and "masculine" style and called each other mammi/mommy and pappi/daddy. Thus calling oneself lesbian does not make a universal statement about one's identity.

The female students, all childless, self-identified, with the exception of one, who called herself mati, as lesbian or gay or tomboy. The students expressed that they did not have much appreciation for mati and talked about them with a certain disdain: "Ah, those women who do it with men, too. That has got to stop." Arguing from a lesbian identity perspective as fixed, true, and authentic, they saw mati sexual behavior as untrustworthy, self-serving, and too pragmatic, too interested in money. If they, at some point in the future, want to have children, they would prefer to have an artificial donor instead of going to bed with a man. The dismissal of mati on the grounds that they do it with men speaks of the internalization of a dominant Euro-American narrative in which one should be either heterosexual or homosexual, not both. While I had not specifically asked them about it, they volunteered that it was difficult for them "to come out" at the university, again reproducing a dominant Euro-American narrative about what one is to do when one discovers one's sexual "nature." As I noted before, the coming out scenario is not part of the mati configuration. The self-identifications and the statements of the students would seem to invoke unproblematically a new "global lesbian identity."

In my reading it is not surprising nor overly significant that the university students adopted global labels. These young women had access to the Internet and had no overt local middle-class models or concepts for female same-sex desire. This does not mean at all, however, that they had thrown all the elements of mati sensibility and understanding overboard. As one of the girls, Beverly Koornjik, a twenty-five-year-old law student, recounted, her family did not officially know that she was gay but had its suspicions. They regularly asked when she was going to bring "Johnny" home, and her mother had suggested a ritual bath to turn around her Apuku—that is, her daughter should consult a ritual healer to sreka en Apuku/settle her Apuku, to make him recede more into the background. The contours of mati sensibility have not gone too far underground among these young women, who seemed, on first acquaintance, to inhabit a space of Western sexual identity formation.

Among working-class women, in 2001, the mati work was very much alive, and so was the gendered division of roles. All these women referred to themselves as mati. In this period a group of mati was planning to hold a Mr. Gay Suriname contest, which in the end failed to materialize.

In the sexual domain, there was, especially in the case of young, highly educated men and women, an emergence of self-referentiality in terms of gay and lesbian identity, which in my reading does not signal that a homogenized global gay or lesbian identity is in formation. The labels are adopted, through access to the Internet, gay and lesbian movies, and visits to the Netherlands, but that does not mean mati sensibilities among young women have vanished. The mati work remains a significant source of meaning. It is not frozen in time, but they accommodate and change it as needed. Older working-class women, in their thirties and forties and up, are engaged in the mati work and thus do not claim an exclusionary sexual identity.

Few theoreticians of sexual globalization have focused on the empirical details of lives, organized around sex with same-sex persons, as they are lived in specific settings in the so-called Third World. I have tried in this chapter to provide depth and thick description to a transnational sexual phenomenon pertaining to women, which is rare enough in itself. My problems with the cultural homogenization thesis are numerous. The powerful narrative that underlies it reinstates the binary logic of "tradition" being associated with the mati work and "modernity" with lesbianism, the former inevitably giving way to the latter. This constitutes part of the global imperialist script. Yet something else is at stake: teleological scripts of Western gay and lesbian identities inexorably spreading across the globe and being swallowed wholesale everywhere overlook the agency of Afro-Surinamese women and their cultural situatedness. The often painful and mundane processes involved are not well captured by such concepts, which not only do not pay attention to power differentials involved in such relationships but also offer a totalizing misreading of the triumphant, global march of homosexual and gay identity out of disparate, messy, hybrid, on-the-ground phenomena. Finally, this discourse reinstates global imperial relations in the domain of same-sex sexuality. Sooner rather than later we will have to let go of the entire tradition-modernity binary because it is not helpful—indeed, it obscures more than it illuminates.
This chapter suggests that both women who travel transatlantically and women who are living in Suriname partake in and shape the phenomenon of sexual globalization. Both categories engage in bricolage to make sense of their sexual activities, but the content of their psychic-spiritual-sexual economy is still in place. Globalization does not only affect them, however: the sexualities of other groups of women, including white Dutch women, are also implicated in this process, as was demonstrated in the case of Pamela. In many recent queer studies that call for a “transnational turn” the ethnically unmarked position in (former) metropoles has escaped attention.

Coda

This study, The Politics of Passion, has captured (part of) life as it has been lived by Afro-Surinamese working-class women in Paramaribo and in the Netherlands over the last decade of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first, as refracted through the lenses of a female anthropologist of Surinamese descent. Black women have taken a central role in few studies on sexual subjecthood. Here the politics of passion as enacted by working-class women—street sweepers, market women, cleaning women, and newspaper sellers—received attention. Studies of black working-class life in the hemisphere have overwhelmingly targeted the family system, notably the “oddness” and undesirability of matrifocality, and have thus focused on the trials and tribulations in the relationships between men and women. By contrast, this book addresses the meaningful, nurturing, sexual, and emotional relationships that Afro-Surinamese women carve out for themselves.

The framework of my understanding of female selves, gender, and sexualities is that of the black Diaspora. I believe that Afro-Suriname has much to contribute to our understanding of how a particular people elaborated on a set of West African principles they had taken with them, embarking on the Middle Passage and in establishing communities in the “New World” from “scratch.” One of the intriguing questions my work raises is since Afro-Surinamese women have found nurturance and sexual and emotional bonding with female partners, has this “model” found more widespread proliferation elsewhere? The few existing leads point to similar constructions of sexual subjecthood in West Africa, the Caribbean, and black America as a most fruitful field for further exploration.

Another question concerns the future of this black diasporic sexual knowledge system and set of practices. If globalization continues to accelerate, will these practices continue to frame the ways in which Afro-Surinamese women both in Suriname and in the Netherlands think about themselves and shape their subjectivities, or will they eventually become black “lesbians”? Will they come to think of sexual activity as sexual identity? Clearly, I can only speculate about this question, but the longevity and tenacity of the sexual culture Afro-Surinamese women embody point to a deeply anchored set of beliefs and understandings that will not be shed easily, as one removes a coat. There is a deep history that precedes this historical moment. As Mis’ Juliette said: "Mi s’ sa, un kon mit’ a wroko dya, a no un mekén”/My sister, we found the mati work when we got here, it was not us who invented it. In addition, the preference of many Dutch Surinamese women to spend their life in Afro-Surinamese circles means that the conditions are favorable that collectively the cultural heritage may be kept alive. Even if the macrostructures women live in continue to change, it is the everyday practices that will go on to shape their understandings of themselves as sexual beings.