



The Politics of Passion

Women's Sexual Culture
in the Afro-Surinamese
Diaspora

Gloria Wekker





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It was an acknowledgement that ethnographic research, whatever else it is, is a form of human relationship. When the lines long drawn in anthropology between participant-observer and informant break down, then the only truth is the one in between; and anthropology becomes something closer to a social art form, open to both aesthetic and moral judgment. The situation is riskier, but it does bring intellectual labor and life into closer relation.

MCCARTHY BROWN 1991

1

No Tide, No Tamara / Not Today, Not Tomorrow: Misi Juliette Cummings's Life History

This chapter centers on the life history of an eighty-four-year-old Afro-Surinamese working-class woman, Misi Juliette Cummings. She had five male partners in the course of her life, bore twelve living children and her *wan ai karu*, literally "corn with one eye," the apples of her eye, were women. She had a relationship with a woman that lasted for forty years and numerous sexual liaisons with other women. I recorded her life history over the course of a nineteen-month period, in 1990 and 1991, when I lived in her backyard in the capital of Suriname, Paramaribo. Juliette's life history is the cornerstone of this book; her life is worth telling because it addresses, in a highly condensed form, all of its major themes.

First, the narrative of her life foregrounds the sexual subjectivity of a black diasporic woman, an Afro-Surinamese or Creole woman, whose construction of self challenges many received anthropological notions about gender, sexuality, marriage, kinship, and family. Juliette's sexuality was based on a sense of agency and self-worth that made sexual fulfillment and not the sex of the object of her desire the most important factor. She displayed tremendous joy in sexuality with other women, coupled with considerable sexual prowess, skills, and narrative capabilities in the domain of sex. She inhabited a space where the *mati work* is prominent. The *mati work* is an old institution, first mentioned in Dutch colonial literature in 1912, in which women

have sexual relations with men and with women, either simultaneously or consecutively. The prevalence of this institution in Afro-Suriname points to a more broadly based cultural repertoire. In one of my central understandings, the *mati* work is expressive of the West African-based cultural archive of sexual subjectivity as slaves belabored it under specific demographic and colonial-political circumstances in the former Dutch colony, Suriname. As such it has significance for the construction of sexual subjectivity in other parts of the black Diaspora. Juliette's narrative also charts her relationships with men and the way she managed to reconcile her primary interests in women with her male partner(s). There are few, if any, testimonies in the anthropological literature in which a black woman talks so openly about sex, displays the agency to order her life in that domain, and informatively reports on what gave her pleasure.

Second, there are still few Caribbean women's life histories of any class background. A woman's life, lived with resourcefulness and savvy, reported with considerable insight and spanning almost the entire twentieth century, is rare enough in itself. While her narrative is a uniquely individual story, it is as much a collective story, a story of women of her generation, her ethnic and class background, enacting the same versatile sexual behavior. She saw herself as *poti sma*/a poor woman, a member of the subordinate *volksklasse*/"popular class." The narrative of her life opens windows onto the ways working-class Afro-Surinamese women survived in the twentieth century, how they ordered their universe and what values they lived by. Juliette was firmly embedded within women's working-class culture and honored its sensibilities by being a *dyadya uma*/a real woman, a sturdy woman, who knew how to take care of the business of managing life, her own and those lives entrusted to her, economically, religiously, culturally, politically, and sexually.

Third, Juliette's life history and specifically her lexicon in the domain of subjectivity offer a reading of a multiplicitous self; a self that is multilayered, complex, integrating various instantiations of "I." There are numerous ways in which Juliette made pronouncements about her self in her first language, the local creole, Sranan Tongo: in singular and in plural terms, in feminine and in masculine terms, and in terms of third-person constructions. This conceptualization of self is underwritten by the worldview embedded in the Winti religion, which is firmly present in the working class. Juliette conceived of her sexual activities as behavior, not in terms of a deep-seated core identity. This complex "I" is not the fragmented self postulated under postmodernity and should not be equated with it. Amidst all the multiplicity of the self, there is simultaneously, in Juliette's life history, a search for unity of the self. In the narrativization of her life, certain enduring themes emerge, which give unity to her life: her love for

economic and social independence, refusing to be "under a man," wanting children, living well with her *mati*, taking care of spiritual balance in her own life and in that of those around her.

The representation of Juliette's life in this chapter is highly condensed, but in the following chapters several themes and institutions, constituting her life like concentric circles or like the famous layers of an onion (Geertz 1973; Ross and Rapp 1997), will be taken up again and laid out in more detail. It is important to note at the outset that my rendering of Juliette's life, as well as the entire book, underwrites the importance, in the study of sexuality, of a brand of social constructionism that is simultaneously deeply aware of political economy. By political economy I mean

the attempt to constantly place culture in time, to see a constant interplay between experience and meaning in a context in which both experience and meaning are shaped by inequality and domination (and the) attempt to understand the emergence of particular peoples at the conjunction of local and global histories, to place local populations in the larger currents of world history

(ROSENBERRY, QUOTED IN LANCASTER AND DI LEONARDO 1997B:4).

The combination of social constructionism and political economy means that I will as consistently as possible bring together a critical analysis of sexual experiences and meanings and a careful consideration of material practices. Sexual lives cannot be understood apart from the changing political economies in which those lives are embedded, and those economies include

dominant and contesting constructions of gender, race, sexual "perversions" and nationality—constructions that themselves carry traces of long and complicated histories of conquest, resistances, exploitation, . . . and neocolonial structures. They also include . . . "sexualized" states—states' ubiquitous uses of gender, sexual, and racial ideologies in order to enact their own legitimacy and control over citizens.

(LANCASTER AND DI LEONARDO 1997B:4, 5)

How do I tell the story of Misi Juliette Cummings's life, a life that spanned almost the entire twentieth century, 1907 through 1998? It is clear that the narrative that unfolds in these pages is a story that we, in a very real sense, crafted together, and thus I am as present in these pages as she is. In seeking the truth in between the participant-observer and the informant, I do not play the "God trick." I cannot hide myself behind the role of an invisible and omniscient third-person narrator (Haraway 1991). Having finally tapped into Juliette's seemingly endless source of stories

about women she had sexually connected with, I teasingly remarked one day: "Luku, Juliette, a gers' ef' ala sani den umasma ben du, in' a ten dati, a ben de fu didon makandra"/Look, Juliette, it looks like the only thing women in the olden days did was to lie down together. She was indignant: that was not true at all. I was the only one who wanted to know everything about her life and hear her stories. On the most obvious level, then, Juliette and I crafted this narrative together. No one had ever asked her in such a sustained way about her life, her friends, how she made a living, what she expected from and enjoyed in male and female sexual partners, or about her children. Inspired by my ceaseless questions, events that had become shrouded in the mists of time came to light again for her.

On yet another level, this narrative is a coproduction, a segment of the lives of each of us that was crossed. In that sense I want to acknowledge the ways in which our, both mine and Juliette's, erotic subjectivity were crucial in its forging. My positionality as an Afro-Surinamese anthropologist who loves women was vital in helping me gather thick information about her and other Afro-Surinamese women's sexuality. In the past decade the debate has been opened on the powerful vantage point that acknowledgment of the erotic subjectivity of the ethnographer affords. Instead of the ideal agent of value-free, objective knowledge, which "requires a notion of the self as a fortress that must be defended against polluting influences from its social surroundings" (Harding 1991:158), fieldwork by an ethnographer who starts from the premise of equality and who acknowledges difference yields less biased, more valuable and sensitive data.

If in participant observation it is the person of the researcher, which serves as the most central and sensitive instrument of research, it behooves us to be transparent, accountable and reflexive about the different modalities in which the self engages with others. Acknowledgment of sexual subjectivity should not be misread as a license for an unbridled, honorless exploitation of the Other on a more intimate level than has thus far generally been acknowledged. I am suggesting that methodology provides information about the various ways in which one locates oneself—psychologically, socially, linguistically, geographically, epistemologically, and sexually—to be exposed to experience in a culture (Wekker 1998a). This position entails a fundamentally different relationship between the researcher and the people with whom she works than traditionally has been envisioned. I work from an inverted model, which starts with a simple but rather fundamental acknowledgment: but for the grace, patience, and interests of the people involved, there would be little research. Both researcher and the people involved are subjects, active agents with their own emotions and agendas. Moreover, all knowledge is gained at the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual

locations; thus, "all scientific knowledge is always, in every respect, socially situated . . . neither knowers nor the knowledge they produce are or could be impartial, disinterested, value-free, Archimedean" (Harding 1991:11). There is not *one*, optimal position from which to do research; the positions are as varied as we are. At the very least we must own and acknowledge our locations, and there is no good reason to exclude sexual locations from our work, either as an a priori or a posteriori excision.

So, by way of preliminary answer to the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter: I will tell Juliette's story as faithfully as she told it to me, and the process of her telling me her stories, embedded as it was in an atmosphere of being mutually attracted to each other, is a part of this narrative as well, with all the joys and difficulties our positions entailed.

I want to ask this question in a second sense: how do I tell Miss Juliette's life history, and the sexual stories of other Creole working-class women, in light of a dominant Euro-American history of representing black women's sexuality as excessive, insatiable, the epitome of animal lust, and always already pathological? How do I avoid staging a latter day Sarah Baartman show, with Juliette as the traveling spectacle this time? In this second sense, as well, I feel implicated. The question has preoccupied me in the many years since I first embarked on this project. Ultimately, the only pertinent answer is that I expressly call attention to the history of dominant representations of black female sexuality in order that this deeply racialized, lethal imagery can be deconstructed. By now it has become commonplace to say that sexuality is gendered and classed—and I will discuss these interconnections elaborately in the course of this text—but the imbrication and foundational inscription of sexuality with "race" is still something that can be overlooked, in many studies, without too many serious consequences. Thus not only black sexualities suffer from these inscriptions, white and other ethnicized and racialized sexualities are also constructed by various inscriptions, resulting in differential positions regarding appropriate and "normal" sexuality and corporeality. In lending my pen to Creole working-class women who speak in their own words about their sexualities, I hope to contribute to that deconstruction.

On Oral History

To tell a story is to take arms against the threat of time, to resist time, or to harness time. The telling of a story preserves the teller from oblivion; the story builds the identity of the teller and the legacy which she leaves for the future.

(PORTELLI 2001:59)

Juliette was a gifted storyteller, who obviously enjoyed being my center of attention over an extended period of nineteen months and incidentally also after the first period of my fieldwork when I returned to Suriname or when she came to visit her children, including me, in the Netherlands. The point in her life cycle at which she told me her stories, in 1990–1991, was significant. She had a lot of time, because she did not have any children that she was responsible for and she did not have to work anymore. She accommodated her life, more or less, to mine. In addition, she still was very sharp and remembered minute details of events that had happened seventy years earlier. When I last was with her, in 1997, she could not tell me those stories any more, although she vividly remembered our time together. The length of the period in which I interviewed her resulted in my hearing several stories repeatedly as well as different versions of one story, e.g., she told me two versions of the first time she had sex. As rapport grew and she trusted me more, she gave me more details and her stories started to include quite intimate details.

Juliette did not tell me her life history chronologically; one day she preferred to tell me *odo/proverbs* and sing songs; another day something propelled her to recount an event in her life or to give me an interpretation of the characters of her children. Yet I have chosen to reconstruct her life mainly, but not exclusively, chronologically because that has seemed the most accessible form to me. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli notes that when the narrator herself does not perceive one particular event or epoch as a key event or pivot in her life, that is to say, when she sees her entire life as meaningful, then that makes it easier to take chronology as the organizing factor (2001:66).

Sometimes the story wanted to be told differently, however, jumped ahead of itself. As I reconstructed her life, I have encountered problems dating events. Often I have had to estimate her age in the context of public events or the length of intimate relationships. Like her, I used the ages of her children or grandchildren, or other significant events like World War II, as signposts.

In interviewing Juliette about her life, I have worked on the assumption that I was dealing with verbal artifacts (stories) shaped by Juliette's self-perception, by the encounter with me as the interviewer, and by my perception and interpretation of Juliette and her words (Portelli 2001). It should thus be clear that oral history as an ethnographic practice cannot lay claim to the impossible dream of attaining the absolute "truth" of a life or of history. Since Juliette's telling of her life is part of her life, what we have is something that may not be the truth, but it is something otherwise invaluable: her interpretations of her experiences. These are colored in the light of what she perceived me to be interested in. I have no doubt that with a different interviewer, interested in other themes, she would have come up with other stories. The question to be contemplated is not "what is the relation *between*

life and story," but, far more interesting, rather, "what is the place of the story *within* the life" (Portelli 2001)? How does she construct the story in order to project a particular persona? What are the characteristics of that persona? What is important for her to bring across?

In order to answer those questions, it is necessary to introduce another way of analyzing Juliette's story. In addition to the chronological or horizontal mode, which narrators may or may not pay attention to in their narration, they often use three different vertical levels to organize the narrative of their life: a personal, a collective, and a national and global level. Portelli describes these levels as follows:

Personal: private and family life; the life cycle of births, marriages, jobs, children, and deaths; and personal involvement in the two other levels. Space referent: the home.

Collective: the life of the community, the neighborhood, and the workplace; strikes, natural catastrophes, and rituals; and collective participation in "institutional" episodes. Space referent: the town, the neighborhood, and the workplace.

Institutional: the sphere of politics, government, parties, unions and elections; the national and international historical context; and ideology. Space referent: the nation and the world

(PORTELLI 2001:70)

These, admittedly, are analytical levels, and in Juliette's life history these levels are not watertight; they interplay and impinge upon one another. In my rendering of her life I will indicate when a particular sequence or event can be read as inhabiting a particular level. The major emphases in Juliette's story were on the personal and collective levels, since these two were the grounds overwhelmingly upon which she organized her life.

Meeting Mis' Juliette

There are always two subjects to a field situation, and . . . the roles of "observed" and "observer" are more fluid than it might appear at first glance.

(PORTELLI 2001:30)

Having arrived in Suriname to do research at the end of January 1990, I asked friends and acquaintances to help me find housing in a working-class Creole neighborhood. Annabel, a friend I had known in the Netherlands in the eighties, had migrated back to Suriname, and she introduced me to Mis' Juliette, whom she called Ouma Juliette/Grandma Juliette. Juliette lived in a neighborhood close to the center of town, Land van Dijk, consisting mostly

of Creole and Maroon inhabitants, which is reputed to be *dyango*/unruly and tough. Many streets in the neighborhood are unpaved, except for the main thoroughfares that surround it. At the end of Juliette's street is the dr. Willem Campanjestraat, which harbors a large day market where fruit, vegetables, meat, and bread are sold. Even though it has been around for decades, it is still called the temporary market, and it is a center of neighborhood activity and gathering. In her backyard Juliette had an empty, wooden house without running water but with electricity, and she agreed that I could live there. My sturdy little wooden house consisted of three tiny rooms: a living room, a bedroom where I hung my hammock, and a kitchen area. I paid rent to Anton, one of her sons, who had built and owned the house, and moved into it in March, after I had whitewashed the walls, hung posters and pictures of family and friends, and collected kitchenware and the barest of furnishings through my Surinamese network. I was ready to start.

At eighty-four years old, Juliette was a beautiful and attractive woman. When we got to know each other better, she often reminisced about how attractive she had been when she was young, with her *krin kleur*/light skin color, her round face, and her long, "good hair." Good hair refers to hair that is long and straight or wavy, not unruly, short, frizzy, or natural, which is still often called or considered "bad" hair. Short, quicksilver, with her gray hair in two braids, which are tucked under her colorful *angisa*/headdress, she still went to the market every day to do her shopping and to chat with her *stamans*/male and female friends. It soon became clear that she had had her own booth at the market until she was in her seventies. Her *angisa* always matched the color of her dress, and she carried an orange plastic bucket to the market in which she put her fish or meat, onions, and tomatoes. Juliette never, never had problems coming by the products that were regularly scarce for ordinary human beings: bread, milk, sugar, rice, Maggie cubes (who would seriously consider cooking a meal without them?). Juliette knew everything about what was going on in the neighborhood, was loved and respected, and was often consulted in ritual—cultural matters. In her yard, she grew plants and herbs, like *kuswe*/Bixa orellana (Bixaceae), *stoypiwiri*/Ruta graveolens (Rutaceae) against seizures, and *strun*/lemongrass, that are necessary to make home remedies against all kinds of ailments (Sordam and Eersel 1989). After a while I was present when Juliette would tell people exactly how to make those remedies, and she was often asked to preside over *fanowdu*/matters in the spiritual domain.

Juliette's first and main language was Sranan Tongo,¹ or *Nengre*/Negro language, as she called it. The linguistic situation in Suriname is complicated and needs some clarification. A former possession of the Netherlands, Dutch is still the official language in Suriname, written and spoken in schools, in

government settings, in newspapers, and on TV. Dutch is still accorded higher status than Sranan Tongo, but both serve as *linguae francae* among the many different ethnic groups that make up its population of 440,000 people. Sranan Tongo (ST) or Sranan is an English-based creole that originated in the first years of the plantation colony, around 1650. Surinamese Dutch (SD) is the local variety of Dutch spoken by many people in Suriname (and in the Netherlands). SD has many "flavors"; some varieties are almost indistinguishable from Standard Dutch, others are literal translations from Sranan into Dutch (Wekker and Wekker 1991).² Most of the working-class women I worked with spoke both Dutch and Sranan. Typically, Sranan would become the vehicle when they were inspired, excited, or just well at ease. Especially older women, like Mis' Juliette, spoke mainly Sranan. But sometimes she would surprise me with a quaint and archaic Dutch expression. If she could not make sense of someone's behavior, she would say, for example: "Andermans boek is duister om te lezen, baya"/Someone else's book is hard to read, you hear. Or, when she thought that I was pulling her leg: "Verneuk de gek; dat is toch geen zonde"/There is no sin in making a fool of a crazy person. I have translated the direct utterances of women, whether the source language was Surinamese Dutch or Sranan Tongo, into English. The target variety of English I have chosen is intended to be closer to Black English Vernacular than to Standard American English.

It took us several months to get used to each other and to figure each other out. I was not very fluent in Sranan Tongo when I arrived, so our early conversations were somewhat halting. I tried to explain to her as best as I could what my study was about, phrasing it in terms of my curiosity about how Creole working-class women were keeping their heads above water, under the ever deteriorating economic circumstances, and what gave them joy, psychologically. Although Juliette would nod emphatically, especially when I talked about the economic hardship afflicting women, I had the distinct feeling that I was not making a very deep impression on her. She would grant me:

"Ay, *dyakasa, mi bret' so te dat' mi ben nyan prisiri³ te mi ben de yongu, a 'er' kondre, a libi kon pori now*"/(exclamation) *I am so glad that I had fun when I was young, because this country, our entire life has become spoiled now. "Ala sani kon moro diri ala dey"/Everything is becoming more expensive every day and "un ben de poti sma, ooktu, ma un no ben pina lek' den sma e pina now"/women of my generation were poor, too, but we did not suffer like people are suffering now.*

Our initial conversations were mainly about how she had survived, how she had raised her many children, and the grief she had known about the

deaths of some of the children. It should be emphasized, however, in my initial explanations to her of my work, that I did not mention that I was especially interested in meeting and spending time with *mati*/female friends, lovers, women who are sexually involved with women. Lacking the cultural competence to decide whether and when I could openly talk about *mati*, I was reluctant to mention the word *mati* at all.

While I thus initially posed as a disembodied, objective researcher, only allowing a limited view into my objectives, the answers I reaped from her were equally limited, staying on safe ground, not volunteering much information that I did not already know from the literature. I gradually realized that I was not the only one trying to read her; she was also trying to read me. Her signposts were different than mine; while I was interested in hearing about working-class women's lives, sexuality, and the *mati* work from her—without indicating that clearly—she was giving me a political reading. Later on, she told me that, in the beginning, she had not trusted me politically. She did not know where to place me: was I in the Desi Bouterse camp?⁴ Juliette, being a lifelong member of NPS,⁵ the largely Creole National Surinamese Party, would not think of sharing her stories with someone who might be NDP, the National Democratic Party, a multiethnic political party founded by members of the military regime that had seized power in February 1980. After she had come to trust me and saw that I had few good words to say about any of the male-dominated political parties,⁶ unfortunately including her own NPS, she started to open up to me.

Daily Living

"Pikin aksi e fala bigi bon"/The little ax fells the big tree.

JULIETTE

In the first month after I had moved into the house in her backyard, Juliette began offering me platters of food when she had cooked. At first she asked one of her unemployed grandsons, Charly, who was always hanging out in our backyard, to bring me the food, but later on she came over herself and sat chatting with me, while I ate, smoking a fat cigar⁷ and rubbing her teeth with its ashes. When she invited me to take showers in her house, instead of washing with buckets in the shed in the backyard, I knew that I had made some progress. Gradually, I also acquired access to the telephone in her house. Still later we developed a routine where she would shop and cook for us every day. I thought the appropriate course of action was to

give her money, but that was hardly her objective and my suggestion, in fact, insulted her. This was a too direct, a too calculated gesture, which she did not appreciate. Instead, I began to pay the electricity bills for both our houses and I paid the laundry woman who came once a week to wash our clothes. I knew this pleased her when she said: "Let' anu e was' krukt' anu"/The left hand washes the right, pointing to a deeply felt wisdom in working-class women's circles that cooperation is absolutely necessary if one wants to accomplish anything (Wekker 1997). I was just beginning to see the contours of that worldview.

To me her cooking was no mean thing, because, beside the fact that she cooked really well, before I had had to spend precious time finding and standing in line for milk, bread, and other food items. Gradually I recognized that when things were well between us she would put the food on my plate and serve me, sit with me, and entertain me with stories, things that had happened that morning in the neighborhood, or give me her comment on what the politicians had cooked up now, whereas when she was angry at me I had to serve myself and sit alone at the table. Equally expert at showering me with attention and giving me the cold shoulder, food took a privileged place in expressing those different modalities.

Food (*nyan* in Sranan) is a language rich in symbolic content. Food may serve as a medium for multiple complicated social transactions, as individuals and social groups use food to control others, establish and maintain sexual relations, avoid or initiate conflict, or express some aspect of cultural identity (Scheper-Hughes 1992:131). Both in same-sexed and in opposite-sexed Creole relational spheres, there is a strong connection between food and eroticism. Being served by the loved one, in opposite-sexed spheres usually the woman and in same-sexed spheres the one who is performing the "feminine" role,⁸ is experienced as a testimony to the well-being of the relationship.

Our days together were always full: after I came home from my morning round, having spent time with one of my twenty-five informants sweeping streets, selling produce in the market, or cleaning a government building, Juliette would be waiting impatiently for me in her house, having cooked one of my favorite meals. After our meal we would go to my house, where she would tell me stories and *odo* or sing songs she had thought of that morning. While I tried to work out my notes of that morning on my laptop, she taught me *fos' ten singi*/songs of the olden days, e.g.:

Mi trow kaba

Mi trow kaba

Eliza na fu mi (2x)

Basi Kupu⁹

Kon prey a poku

Eliza na fu mi (2x)

[I am married already

I am married already

Eliza is mine (2x)]

Boss Kupu

Come play the music

Eliza is mine (2x)]

Another old song is:

Fefi yuru mamanten

Granmisi mek' wan manpikin (2x)

Fa' a nen? (2x)

Buriki kakumbe (2x)

[At five in the morning

The older woman gave birth to a son (2x)

What's his name? (2x)

Donkey chin (2x)]

In the beginning of June 1990 I had to go back to Los Angeles for a conference. I had intended to be away for a week and a half, but I was unexpectedly delayed much longer. Later she told me that she had thought I would not come back, even though I had called her a couple of times to keep her informed of my whereabouts. Our growing attachment was evident from the fact that we missed each other terribly during the time I was away; our daily living together and talks had become an anchor in both our lives.

One morning in July, at breakfast, she told me that she had been to a *lobi singi* the night before. I reacted as if stung by a bee, because I knew *lobi singi* from the literature (Comvalius 1935, 1939; Herskovits and Herskovits 1936) as gatherings where *mati* sing self-composed love songs for each other and was not sure at that moment whether they were still performed. I expressed my disappointment that she had not taken me with her, because this was just what I was interested in. I finally explained to her that I was especially interested in *mati*, and the dams broke. The *mati* work lit up like a lighthouse in the landscape of her life's experiences. From then on, one story after another about the women she had been with in her younger days came tumbling out. Still,

I wanted to make sure that I understood her right. It was almost too good to be true: I had come to Paramaribo wanting to study whether *mati* life was still around and here I found myself living with one; one, as I teased her, who had invented it. One evening I asked her directly: "Juliette na wan matisma, no?" literally, "Juliette is a *mati*, no?" i.e., are you a *mati*? Impatient at such stupidity, she answered me: "Ma di m' e srib' nanga umasma, dan m' e mati"/But since I am sleeping with women, then I *mati*. In using the verb *na/to* be and the noun *mati*, asking her whether she belongs to the category of *mati*, I was inscribing an identity for Juliette, whereas she was answering me in terms of verbs, that is, describing her behavior and actions. Here I just want to note that our different phrasings, signaling identity versus activity, are significant, because they bespeak two different models, a dominant Euro-American and a working-class Afro-Surinamese model, of how sexual subjectivity is envisioned. I will elaborate on this crucial issue in the chapters that follow.

We now joined the endless round of secular and spiritual events that were taking place in Paramaribo, in spite of the dire economic situation. The Surinamese guilder was on a dazzling inflationary course and, especially for people who did not have access to foreign currencies, either Dutch guilders or U.S. dollars, the possibilities of making ends meet were grim. Being able to give a party almost certainly meant access to foreign currency. We became regulars at these parties, she twice my age and half my height, taking me out in her colorful *koto*, traditional, multilayered skirts, and matching *angisa*. Her cronies at the market and at parties teased her about me. At first I did not understand, but later, as my language skills improved, it was quite clear what they were saying, in the typical cutoff and elliptical way that *odo* are deployed: "Aiiiiiii, owru kaw . . ." Literally, they said, "Yes, old cow . . ." alluding to the *odo* "Owru kaw e nyan yong' grasi"/Old cow eats young grass. This *odo* is used especially, when there is a large age differential between partners. Juliette would beam, when they said it, neither denying nor affirming it, making good-natured *tyuri*¹⁰ and dismissive hand gestures. She herself used another expression for us that was far more humbling: "pikin aksi e fala bigi bon"/the little ax fells the big tree.

Gradually I felt free to confide in her about the rather unhappy affair I was involved in since I had come to Paramaribo. I was seeing a middle-class woman who was in a longstanding relationship with another woman. Juliette was empathetic, but she also felt that I was pretty stupid to have opened my heart to Carmelita. She made it no secret that she had managed things differently and more smartly, when she was young, so she took considerable pleasure in counseling me on what to do:

"Meisje, m' o ferter' i wan sani"/Girl, I will give you some advice. When you are doing it with somebody, who already has someone else, do not give all

your love to that person. Just do it with her, but keep your love with your own sma/person, woman. This is the way I have always done it.

Juliette was outraged at my openness about my relationship with Carmelita, at the fact that her lover was my friend, too, and that I visited them at their home:

"Mi patu no ben bor' a nyan disi, yere! Yu na f' fur' man, y' e f' fur' en uma. A kompe wroko na wan lawlaw sani. Noit' mi ben du sani lek' y' e du now, mi ben sa du en kibri fasi; a visiti fu mi vriendin no ben sa sabi. Yu no mus' go drape; mek' Carmelita kon' dya"/My pot did not cook this food, you hear? You are a thief, you are stealing her woman. The mati work truly is a crazy thing. I would never have done what you are doing now, I would have done it much more discreetly; my lover's mati would never have known. You should not go there. Have Carmelita come here.

Despite the vicissitudes of my affair with Carmelita, those were happy days for Juliette and me and we were both aware of how we were filling each other's needs. I had come to Paramaribo with an academic purpose, but also with the personal aim to learn about my deceased working-class mother's cultural background, looking for answers to questions I had not been able to ask her. Exchanging stories with Juliette, having a best friend and a confidante, laughing at each other's idiosyncrasies, going places together, being taken care of by her, gave me a sense of belonging and safety. I felt thoroughly at home in Paramaribo, no mean feat since I was one and a half years old when my family had migrated to the Netherlands. Juliette introduced me as her daughter to neighbors or friends who asked who I was, making me feel in place and that I was welcomed. She was the "informant" I could not have dreamed up in my wildest dreams: intelligent, lively, a storehouse of knowledge, and as curious as I was about how people lived and the reasons they attributed to the things they did. Had Juliette had the opportunity to study after elementary school, she would have liked to be a teacher, and it was clear that I could not have found a more adept one.

I had come to her in the winter of her life and telling her about my affair with Carmelita enabled her to comment on my unspeakable behavior. That was the best incentive for her to provide relief with stories about her own life. The stories we weaved together about the women in our lives made her come alive again. She clearly enjoyed giving all her *tori*/stories to someone who was so obviously interested and hanging on to her every word. I learned thickly about her and my own construction of sexuality. As she lived alone, it was gratifying for her to have someone nearby who looked after her on the few days that she was not feeling too well. I accompanied her to the

doctor, because her *krammenade*, her spleen, was impaired, and I became her hero when I protested vociferously when she had to take off her clothes in a room where painters were at work. She often became mute in middle-class environments, loosing the self-confidence and flourish she had in her own surroundings. Through my adoring eyes she experienced herself as the attractive and irresistible woman she had been. She saw me as her daughter, her *pikin s' sa*/little sister, her *pikin fowru*/little chicken and her *wan ai karu*/her "corn with only one eye."

Power and the "Erotic Equation in Fieldwork"

My informants are not just interesting cases. Over the years many have become friends of mine. ... I fully recognize this common affinity and use it to understand my informants better, to engage in discourses with them, and, through these dialogues, to develop my own insights into their culture and personality.... I am one with them, yet not one of them.

(OBEYSEKERE 1981:11)¹¹

The field researcher, therefore, has an objective stake in equality, as a condition for a less distorted communication and a less biased collection of data.

(PORTELLI 2001:31)

Not nearly enough has been written about the psychological underpinnings of "the erotic equation in fieldwork" (Newton 2000), either from the point of view of the anthropologist, much less from that of the "informant." I will assume that the days and the gendered dangers of being labeled a "field groupie," committing professional suicide, are long gone. Or, worse, that my relationship with Juliette would be considered as taking advantage of a poor, lonely, older woman. I believe it is important that we continue a frank conversation about the erotic subjectivity of the ethnographer who is doing fieldwork. I was confronting a psychologically extremely potent mixture of loneliness, being without the context of family and friends, of dependency, my "normal" persona of a professional erased or simply not relevant (Kondo 1992), at times being very different from the women around me, feeling reduced to somewhat childlike status, and at others being like one of them, gratitude for being seen by another person, even if Juliette's gaze only included particular aspects of my self. Admittedly, these were aspects of self that I had not been interpellated by before, such as Juliette reading me as being carried by Amerindian spirits, meaning that she saw me as warmhearted and friendly; yet she also saw me as extremely argumentative,

always taking things too seriously, thinking too much, "full of tricks," not having proper mati manners, not showing respect at the right moments and in the required ways. At times I was aware that I eroticized Juliette's knowledge. Interestingly, the relationship between Juliette and me reminded me in some ways of a relationship between a client, me, and a very special and wise therapist. When new knowledge is part of the stuff that eroticism is made of, then Juliette provided me with plenty. My appreciation for and excitement about the knowledge I was acquiring of the way the world functioned, my development of cultural, linguistic, and religious insights and skills, knowledge of her and myself, was considerable. The setting, very accepting and very loving, in which it was possible to say, ask, and share everything and in which I had the feeling she saw me in—by and large—favorable ways, worked toward that perception too. Knowing Juliette renewed me, it shed new light on me in ways that I had not known before. My research was an adventure that taught me not only about a sexual culture but also about myself. Our encounter was a mutual benevolent sighting; we liked each other and each of us came to see the other as a gift, a very unexpected one. All these ingredients resulted in fertile conditions for me to connect erotically with her.

Not nearly enough has been written yet either about the differential power aspect in a same-sexed erotic relationship between an "informant" and an anthropologist (but see Whitehead and Conaway 1986; Kulick and Willson 1995; Lewin and Leap 1996; Newton 2000). At the time it was important to me not to be the initiator of the relationship. For mostly ageist reasons I never imagined Juliette as a possible sexual partner or that she had erotic interests in me. Had I been the initiator, it would have been hard to sort out my motivations, whether I was doing it to get better data—which would have been unacceptable to me—or because I was "simply" and genuinely attracted to Juliette. Ironically, although the end result ostensibly is the same, I note the different positioning of Ralph Bolton (1996), who made an intentional decision to use male same-sex sexual encounters as a form of data collection in the field of sexual practices in the time of the HIV/AIDS plague. I am less concerned with ethical aspects of his methodology, although he generally does not seem to address power dynamics and imbalances sufficiently and he unproblematically assumes that a sexual encounter will carry the same weight and meaning for his sex partners. More interesting in these configurations are the gendered positions a gay male and a lesbian anthropologist occupy in the field of sexuality, which underscore that gayness and lesbianism, within Euro-American contexts, are not symmetrical positions, that we need to be far more attentive to such differences, and that one of the ways to uncover them is precisely through being transparent about our sexual positionings.

During my research I was not consistently aware that, while I was ostentatiously learning about the construction of her sexuality, I was also and simultaneously learning about my own. Many insights came afterward as I was reading through my extensive field notes. There is a rich field of oppositions in the ways in which she and I constructed desire and acted on it; whereas for her an age difference of more than forty years did not play a role, for me this difference was—initially and also in the long run—largely prohibitive. In my diary at the end of July 1990 I noted:

This morning, when I came out of the shower, I passed Juliette in the kitchen and, laughing loudly, pleased with herself, she cupped my breasts with both hands. To her grandson Raymond, visiting from the Netherlands with his wife and sitting in the living room, she exclaimed: "Mi fas' en bobi, yere!"/ I touched her breasts, you hear! I was somewhat taken aback and said: Ee-ehh?! She said: "M' e kon grani kaba, mi pikin s' sa, na granisma kan du den san' disi"/I have grown old already, little sister, it's older women's prerogative to do this.

I took her gesture for what she said it was and thought it rather charming. In hindsight I have come to interpret it as Juliette already expressing her sexual interest in me. This gesture could have gone unnoticed to Raymond and his white Dutch wife Rita, who was appreciably older than him, since they were in the living room and Juliette and I were in the kitchen. But Juliette expressly called their attention to it. Coupled with her clear pleasure in her own audacity, she was not only playing and flirting with me, but she was also showing herself as a sexual persona to her grandson. There was a naughty and ingenious touch to this gesture: in the first place, she seemed to be signifying a well known odo to him: "M' e owru, ma mi n' e kowru"/ I may be old, but I am not cold. Raymond, who was about my age, responded by chuckling, which I read as his applauding his grandmother. Thus, in this reading, she was showing off to him: look, I am much older than you, but I am still capable of flirting with a woman of your age, while you have a much older woman. The second reading I offer of the gesture is that it is ingenious because it remains ambiguous whether a sexual overture is being made or not. It is true that older women may teasingly touch younger girls' budding breasts, but I could not possibly be counted in that age category. I felt her gesture as a sexual overture, and she implicitly conceded that it might be sexual, but that did not matter anyway. Since she was old already, it was her prerogative to do so, implicitly pointing me to the privileged position of older women in Creole culture. I later regarded this as a key signifier in how she conceived of our relationship.

In my diary of August 1990 I jotted down the following thoughts, struck by the directness of Juliette's sexual overtures, which contrasted with my own, until then largely implicit, standards in this matter.

How is it possible that in a culture that has been called so "roundabout," e.g., by Herskovits in his diary at the Schomburg (1928), I am being propositioned so directly? Her way of courting me is so incredibly direct, according to my standards. No double entendres here—maybe they are lost on me?—but I do not think so; the objective is sex. No vanilla sex is intended, no cuddling and stuff; she wants sex, genital sex.

On the one hand, it is sort of embarrassing that our flirting and teasing got so out of hand. On the other, incredibly funny, rich, true to life. I have to admit that I do like the thought that she finds me attractive and that I get the old mati treatment. But am I really drawn to her?

What am I to do? I don't think having sex is a very good idea, I want to remain her daughter rather than become her mati. How would we continue to live together, if things do not work out? I am not prepared to move out, look for another place to live, and lose her, the worst scenario.

With Juliette as the initiator, I, having ended the relationship with Carmelita by then, but socialized into the notion that being sexually intimate with "an informant" was certainly not the thing to do, kept on hesitating for a while, going back and forth, trying in my diary to come to clarity about the nature of my feelings for her, struggling with my ageism. I sometimes hoped that her desire would dissipate, that it would vanish as silently as it had come, and that things would return to being warm and unproblematically mother-daughterish. Sometimes I enjoyed her ardency, making the knot of contradictory emotions even more inextricable. I have no doubt that I sent contradictory messages. I thought she was attractive and I liked flirting with her, but I did not want to pay the price that was apparently attached to a relationship. I was living on her premises and I had her and my house to lose if things did not work out. Moreover, I had reasons to believe that my freedom to go and come as I pleased would be seriously jeopardized—specifically, that she would object to my sleeping with someone else. Having had multiple simultaneous relationships in the past, this was not an academic issue. I had socialized, during the seventies and eighties, in mainly white lesbian circles in Amsterdam that put premiums on individuality and on inventing and living models of relating in which monogamy and possessiveness were avoided (Wekker 1993, 1998a). Jealousy was just not cool, and one would not want to be caught at it. I was quite competent at performing in these modes. At a later stage the Eurocentric model of lesbian relating had become tire-

some to me: "equality" along several dimensions, age, education, income, and status, was deemed important, with ethnicity playing a more problematical part, and one's lesbian "identity" inescapably meant sexual incarceration with only women. But I knew experientially no other models. From the late eighties on, I mainly had relationships with black women, but that did not necessarily guarantee different models of relating, largely correlating with how long a partner had lived in the Netherlands and whether she had mainly dwelt in white or black circles. Nor was I really prepared to change my ways when someone wanted another, monogamic, way of relating to each other.

My ways of handling the situation with Juliette, stalling, explaining why I did not think it was a good idea, interrogating her about what would change if I did sleep with her, negotiating with her, did not make much impression on her. She had made up her mind that she wanted me and was not about to take no for an answer. As I came to understand her perspective in due course, the fact that she, as the older woman, was propositioning me made it something I could almost not refuse. There was no ambiguity in Juliette's answer when I queried about the sustainability of my love of freedom: "I mus' denk' m' e law"/You must think that I am crazy.

Oral historian Alessandro Portelli reminds us of the importance of thinking through the roles of equality and difference in field research. The two concepts, equality and difference, are related:

Only equality prepares us to accept difference in terms other than hierarchy and subordination; on the other hand, without difference there is no equality—only sameness, which is a much less worthwhile ideal. Only equality makes the interview credible, but only difference makes it relevant. Fieldwork is meaningful as the encounter of two subjects who recognize each other as subjects, and therefore separate, and seek to build their equality upon their difference in order to work together.

(PORTELLI 2001:43)

How can these notions of equality and difference be unpacked in the encounter of Juliette and me? And, more specifically, did our landscapes of equality and difference, as we would have described them to ourselves or to a sympathetic outsider, look the same? Putting the matter in the latter terms already points to a fundamental point of difference in the domain of the formation of our subjectivities. While I would have welcomed the occasion to piece myself together by laying out my understanding of the relationship to a trusted outsider, who came along later in the person of Delani, Juliette would never have directly or fully described the relationship to someone

else. She might have dropped hints about it to her peers, as she did with Raymond and Rita and other family members, on occasion, and she might have listened to others jokingly allude to it, but she would never have openly discussed the ins and outs of the relationship. Writing about our relationship now means that I am engaging in a practice that is foreign and not necessarily congenial to her. Even though we agreed that her life was worth telling, and she was very supportive of my writing a book about *mati*, it was understood that I would only write about our relationship after her death (Wekker 1998a). In seeking the truth of the relationship from her point of view, it might seem as if I am ventriloquizing her. I base myself upon my descriptions of her behavior and utterances, as they are recorded in my field diaries. The extent to which I manage to describe the relationship as it appeared to her, and describe it with integrity, is also the extent to which I have come to understand the world from her point of view. The encounter between Juliette and me, in this land in-between, is open to aesthetic and moral judgment (McCarthy Brown 1991).

It might be easy to assume that I had more power than Juliette in the relationship. In many respects and contrary to what the few descriptions of sexual relationships between (white) male anthropologists and informants of color have told us, Juliette on balance had more power than I. As Creole women, although I was a "prodigal daughter," we were on a level playing field in our negotiations with respect to the intersection of gender and ethnicity. My unpracticed eye put us within the same range of light skin colors, but her insiders' eye did not fail to notice several shades of color between us. This signified differently in her universe than it did in mine: since I had not grown up in Suriname, I did not automatically make connections between lighter skin color and class status. On several occasions it became clear to me that part of her pride in showing me off had to do with the combination of my age and my lighter skin color. Our class situation as measured by income was not radically different, neither she needing me financially nor the other way around. We both had income in foreign currency, the most desired financial modality; she received her most important means of living from her children in the Netherlands, while I had two consecutive U.S. scholarships. Certain elements of my middle-class status, e.g., being a Ph.D. candidate—which to me was very meaningful—were virtually erased in her universe; my professional accomplishments simply were not visible and thus did not mean much to her. She did like the poem "Creole Women," which I wrote in March 1990,¹² and she was proud when, shortly after, it was published in one of the national dailies, *De Ware Tijd*.

Other possibilities that my class position, in conjunction with my nationality, might and did entail in my interactions with others, e.g., entry into

the Netherlands by acting as someone's guarantor or even the possibility of Dutch citizenship by being in a relationship with her/him, simply were not relevant in my relationship with Juliette. She had her children to ease her entry into the Netherlands whenever she wanted to visit and, at her age, had no need whatsoever for the Dutch nationality. The intersection between class and nation did not carry significance in our case.

Besides being meaningful as regards skin color, class, in its lived reality, was accentuated for us both at different moments. I already mentioned the occasions when I accompanied her to the doctor and protested against the treatment that was deemed appropriate for someone of her class. She became strangely mute in middle-class environments, where working-class people are often treated with disrespect. However much I liked my house and the neighborhood where we lived, I did occasionally experience the need to be away from the noise—with different kinds of music coming from four corners—the crowding and the basic living conditions. Sometimes, when the chance presented itself, I stayed in the homes of middle-class friends, who were traveling, and twice Juliette and I spent a weekend in a luxurious hotel. In the environments where I was most at ease she was least at ease, and the other way around was true too; where she blended in, e.g., in our neighborhood, at Winti Prey, and at parties, I was initially uncertain as to the proper behavior. At the hotel we would sit on the terrace by the swimming pool, on a Sunday afternoon, drinking high tea. I enjoyed our outing immensely, while she was mostly silent. I realized that she enjoyed being with me, but not necessarily the location where I took her. People of her class background, which was evident by her traditional working-class Creole attire, had never been welcomed at the hotel before. When we got home she would not fail to tell our next-door neighbor, however, where we had been that weekend.

In the end, it was culture and age that played out most in her favor in the balance of equality and difference between us. She was the expert in a culture, a politics of passion, that I wanted to understand. Moreover, she was older and thus within a Creole context where respect is due to older people, especially women, she was "always right." By the end of October I accepted her standing invitation to "lie down with her." I was enamored of the deeply cultural explanation she had given me of her feelings for me, how her *yeye*/her "soul" had taken to mine and had clearly recognized the *Inyi Winti*/the Amerindian spirits that were carrying me. These were the same Winti carrying her. Interestingly, at other times, she used a biological discourse to explain her feelings. She supposed that the blood-building injections and pills the doctor had been giving her for her spleen had given her blood more strength and had made her feel alive again: after all, she was not made out of wood.

In *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* Nancy Scheper-Hughes writes about the strong connection poor Brazilians make in their autoethnography between poverty and sex. Sexual vitality is the only thing that reminds them that they are not dead. She movingly describes an old woman, a bag of bones, her infected foot doused in iodine, dancing sexily and suggestively with a young boy (1992:164-165). Poverty and hunger have not been as endemic and systemic in Suriname as in Brazil's Nordeste, and thus the Surinamese configuration, although in some respects reminiscent of the Brazilian, is not the same. I have understood Juliette's zest for life and sex within the context of a culture that grasps sexuality as an extraordinary joyful and healthy aspect of life, possibly a feature of the West African "grammatical behavioral principles" (Mintz and Price 1992 [1976]) in the domain of sexual subjectivity, the expression of which does not need to end in an advanced stage in life. This is in stark opposition to the representation of asexuality that predominantly characterizes older Euro-Americans, with all its limitations and loss of pleasure. The latter representation works toward limiting sex to that venerated stage of life, youth, and is in need of as much explanation as the Afro-Surinamese modality.

Juliette was extraordinarily frank with me in discussing her feelings and behavior and to the extent that I have come to understand the mati work and Creole working-class culture, I owe it largely to her. Our relationship was complex, multilayered, by no means easy, or to be taken for granted. I felt a mixture of love, gratitude, and sometimes transferred anger toward her as a dominant, demanding mother and a jealous lover. She was my most important informant, collaborator, commiserator, supporter, friend, mother substitute. She saw me as a child with Surinamese roots, her little sister, who did not know the first thing about the culture and who badly needed educating in terms of the language and culturally appropriate manners. Juliette's openness toward me was a mirror of my attitude toward her and it certainly helped that in my life, too, mostly women have been the "apples of my eye." We often exchanged information and I would tell her as much from my side of the world as she would tell me about hers. I discussed different theories about the mati work with her, e.g., that some people who had studied the phenomenon thought that women engaged in it because of the absence of men. She responded with a tyuri, sucking her teeth. I told her about developments with regard to homosexuality on the African continent; that the leaders of some African nations held whites responsible for spreading homosexuality. Her concise comment: "No wan bakra ben leri mi, mi pikin s'sa"/no white person has taught me, my little sister. We shared our stories about the women who had been important in our lives and laughed till we cried about ourselves and the women who had broken our hearts: cathartic sessions for

us both. Juliette would repeatedly sigh: "a mati wroko na wan law sani"/the mati work can drive you crazy. And after an exchange about different techniques of having sex, she summed it up: "baya, ala sortu nay de"/my word, there is all kinds of screwing. I told her my coming out story and how my father, at first, had not liked my being a lesbian at all. I explained to her that, where I came from, to be a woman who loves women had long been disparaged and brought feelings of shame and hiding. Such feelings were unthinkable in Mis' Juliette's universe; she had never heard of anything of that kind. "Sortu, syen? Meisje, un kon mit' a wroko dya. A no un' mek' en"/What do you mean, shame? Girl, we found the mati work when we got here. It was not us who invented it. It was one of the early markers of her radically different value structure and the formation of her sexual subjectivity.

Life as a Young Girl

"A ka kor' patu f' i n' e interessee mi lek' a doosje fu Ma Joosje"/That damn coal pot of yours does not interest me as much as Ma Joosje's pussy.

Juliette had two younger brothers and one sister and we sometimes went to visit the one brother and the sister who were still alive. She was not particularly close to them, because, when growing up, Juliette lived with her aunt Anna, her mother's sister, who did not have children of her own and who *kwek' en*, raised her. One of the West African features of the Creole kinship system, which has survived to this day, is that children are easily exchanged between households. Especially when a woman is without children of her own, she is "given" children of her siblings, of other relatives, or of her mati to raise. There is continuity in this practice. Thirty years later, Juliette's oldest daughter, Mama Matsi, who was in her middle twenties and could not have children of her own, raised Juliette's youngest daughter, Floortje, from the day she was born. When Juliette was in her middle thirties and pregnant with her ninth child, she had temporarily taken in her mati, at that time, Wanda. Wanda was very poor, she neither had children nor a place of her own, so Juliette helped her out until she found her own house. Wanda helped her when the baby was born and *fu kwek' en*/helped to raise her. The baby was named after her. Until that time, big Wanda had been crazy about Juliette's youngest child, a boy called Humphrey. Wanda now only had eyes for little Wanda, she took the care of the baby upon her and did not pay attention to Humphrey any more. Juliette says: "Mi no mu' ley g' en, di a ten dat' Wanda geboren, mi no ab' fu was' wan pis' duku f' a pikin dati."/I should not tell lies about her, since the time that Wanda was born, I did not have to wash one diaper for that child.

This is a very typical way for Juliette to open an exegesis on a person or a matter that she wants to do justice to: "Mi no mu' ley g' en"/I should not tell lies about her/him, or, alternatively: "San mi sa taki sondro fu ley?"/What shall I say without telling lies? It is a formulaic opening that attests to the truth she is about to tell; she also creates time to think about what she will say and how she will present it. It is a way of speaking that other older women also engaged in, making it more than an idiosyncrasy.

When Wanda moved out, she took the baby with her and raised her. Juliette says she never would have taken the baby away from Wanda; that would have been a heartless and unforgivable thing to do and is part of working-class women's etiquette. The practice of giving birth to a child, while doing the *mati* work, is referred to as "kisi pikin na sma anu"/getting a child in your woman's hands. Very literally, Juliette gave birth to a child in her *mati*'s hands, even when she was living in concubinage with Dorus, the man with whom she had the longest relationship. The sequel to this tale of the sharing of children is instructive, too, and sheds a more nuanced light on the role of biology in the families people make and on the heterosexist assumptions underlying studies of kinship (Weston 1992; Blackwood 2005; Lewin 2002). Years later little Wanda suddenly died at the age of forty, pregnant with her fourth child. Suffering from an infection, she had to go see a doctor but kept postponing it. Juliette remembers that the day Wanda died a black butterfly was in her house, the whole day. At six in the evening it flew away. The next morning she heard that Wanda had died the day before. Juliette went to sit with big Wanda for days, as one of the obligations, implied in the expression *mati work*, that (ex-)mati have toward each other. In effect, big Wanda had become the mother of little Wanda and the grandmother of the three young children—the oldest was six—that she continued to raise. These grandchildren, now in their late twenties, sometimes came to visit Juliette, but Wanda is their "real" (grand-)mother. Family connections are not only made in opposite-sexed spheres but also between *mati*. These family ties remain intact, even when the women involved have separated or have died.

In Aunt Anna's home Juliette was raised in the EBG religion,¹³ the Protestant Evangelical Brethren Gemeinschaft, also known as the *Hernnhutters*, and she went to an EBG school. When Juliette was twelve she started spending time with older women who were crazy about her. "Mi no ben ab' leti verstand ete, y' e yongu, y' e sport. Mi ben lob' fu ab' prisiri"/I did not have a brain yet; you are young, you go out. I loved to have fun. The *bigisma*/older women, took her to Winti Prey, to dances, to excursions, to *boiti*, literally, "outside," rural districts outside of Paramaribo. She started to work at the age of thirteen as a domestic servant in a private home. She reminisces:

I worked for this nice lady in the Zwartenhovenbrugstraat; "a ben ab' krin kleur en a ben ab' bun ati"/she was light skinned and goodhearted. The work was not hard and I was young and strong. I always had the time to run errands and go see my friends on the way. She would always ask me, very friendly: can you sweep and mop the floor? Do the dishes? There was someone else to do the laundry. If I only had had to deal with her, I would still be working for her. Her husband owned a pharmacy. When the lady was not at home, a ben fufer' mi/he pestered me. He promised me money if I would lay down with him. But, "mansma no ben interesseer mi nooit"/men never interested me.

She found another private home to work, but again the man of the house harassed her. Juliette became sick and tired of men making sexual overtures toward her. The pattern described here, in which men consider it their prerogative to have sexual access to women, especially working-class women, dates from 1920. It is noteworthy that sexual harassment has been operative for so long, but it has only received public attention in Suriname, under the influence of the globalization of the women's movement, in the nineties (see chapter 6).

On the personal level, here is an important theme that keeps coming back in Juliette's utterances about the way she constructed her subjecthood. There were myriad ways in which she expressed that men were not important to her sense of self: "mansma no ben interesseer mi nooit"/men never interested me; "mi no ben de frammejaar so nanga mansma"/I was not so familiar, at ease with men; "mi ik no ben lob' mansma"/"I" did not love men; "mi no ben dipidipi so nanga mansma"/I was not so intimate with men. Her sense of self is deeply embedded in the discourse circulating within the Afro-Surinamese Winti religion where people are carried by various spirits. One of Juliette's main spirits was a male Apuku who did not tolerate real-life men in her life.

As I go back over my notes I notice that Juliette has told me two competing stories about the first time she slept with a woman. In my diary of August 8, 1990, I find the following notes:

Juliette told me today about the first woman she slept with; she was fourteen and it was a girl of her own age. "Un ben du fisti sani makandra, ma a ben sab' griti ooktu. Dan, mi no sab' fa, wan sma ben mus' fu konkru nanga ferter' en ma, so dan en ma ben suku mi tu. Mi srib' nang' en, dan later mi sribi nanga en bigi s'sa umapikin. Dan wan dey, wan bigi sma ben kar' mi en a' e taki: 'Juliette, yu ben nay dri Kasnika uma now. A sari.'"/We did nasty things together, but she also knew how to rub. Then, I do not know how, somebody

must have been gossiping with her mom and telling her, so the next thing I know is that her mother is after me, too. I slept with her, too. Then later I slept with the daughter of her older sister. One day, an older woman called me and told me: Juliette, you have been having sex with three Kasnika¹⁴ women now. That's enough.

Thus, although Juliette had her eye on a fourth woman from the same large family group, she refrained from that. The term *griti*/rubbing, is, as we will see developed in chapter 5, the most colloquial term used by mati to indicate tribadism, according to many accounts a favorite sexual position.

The other story about Juliette's first sexual encounter that I recorded is about an older woman, Yaya, who was about thirty-five years at the time; this is a pattern that still occurs in mati circles today. Yaya already had a *visiti*/girlfriend of her own, Martha. Yaya was thus engaged in what mati call *f furu*/stealing or *uru*/whoring around. In this version, too, Juliette was fourteen years old. She sums it up succinctly: "A mek' mi kon sribi nanga en"/She made me come sleep with her. It was the older woman who took the initiative in expressing interest in the young girl. It is a matter of respect that a younger person, especially when there is a large age gap, should not take the initiative. In general, the initiator stakes a claim to the dominant position in the relationship. Asked what it was like to be with this woman, Juliette recalls:

"We, san mè sa taki, dan?"/Well, what shall I tell you? Here I was, fourteen years old, with my beautiful round face, my light skin color, my full braids, and all the neighborhood women were going crazy over little Juliette. "A mus' de tak' mi yeye, mi kra ben de nanga umasma"/It must have been that my "soul," "I," was with women. Yaya, my first krin visiti/real mati, taught me everything there was to know, she spoiled me, bought me dresses and jewelry, she always gave me little tidbits or money, she helped me set up my room. People in the olden days knew things, you hear? They were really careful with me, too. We did everything: "un ben freri, un ben bosi, un ben griti, ma den no ben broko mi"/we made love, we kissed, we "rubbed," but they did not break me, i.e., deflower me.

The bigisma that she slept with had taken care not to break her *t'ite*, literally, "rope," hymen, because that was deemed appropriate for the first man to do. In Juliette's case that happened when she was about eighteen years old. The man is supposed to give the "self" of the young girl a present of gold, because it is considered a great honor. Terborg (2002:67-70) states that there is no strict virginity ideal among Creoles, in the sense that loss of

virginity would be a sin or a shame. She relates the importance of virginity both to Christian ideals and to African cultural traditions. Virginity is not so much connected to male honor but to female pride. It is also an instrument in the negotiations with men. The fact that that honor is reserved for men may be interpreted as the privileging of men, in this respect, but it may also indicate the notion that it is from connections with men that children result and that the first time with a man thus carries a rite-of-passage character, which should be marked with a present. In other words, I am suggesting that there may be less significance to the fact that the honor is reserved for a man than to the fact that the woman is indicating her readiness to have babies. Juliette remembers that Yaya told her "a no mus' go suku masra"/she should not look for a man. Since Juliette wanted children, she did anyway, after a while.

Yaya was to have her birthday, Juliette wanted to give her a nice present, and she had to go looking for a *kopro beki*, a copper basin, to put the present in. Working-class women, in their many-layered skirts, carry the decorative copper basin on their heads on festive occasions. The basin is filled with flowers and shrubs, red and yellow *fayalobi* (Rubiaceae) and amaranths. After seventy years, Juliette still recalls what the present was that she bought for Yaya: a beautiful pink bowl with little purple roses on it. It was a bowl to simply have around for decorative purposes or to eat *tom-tom* soup from, the thick soup made from ripe green bananas. When Juliette had to run an errand, strong almond essence, for her aunt Anna, she passed by Aunt Hilda and wanted to borrow a *kopro beki* from her. Aunt Hilda went to Anna and, probably alarmed by Juliette's precociousness, told her that Juliette, all of fourteen years old, was looking for a copper basin to give a present to Yaya. Her aunt had told Juliette that she did not appreciate the mati work and that she should stay away from it. When she confronted Juliette, there was no choice but to lie. She said that another friend of Yaya's, Noldi, had sent her to go look for the beki, because Noldi wanted to give Yaya a present. Aunt Anna went straight to Noldi, and the latter had her wits together enough to confirm this story and help Juliette out. She could not go to the birthday proper, because Yaya's mati Martha and all her *speri*/age-mates, friends, were there, but she managed to get the present over there. When the older women saw the present, they all started talking about how Juliette's present was more beautiful than Martha's, and the latter got so flustered that she smacked Yaya across the mouth. Somehow word got to Aunt Anna that Juliette had sent a present after all. But still Juliette did not confess. This scenario is familiar from the description given by the Herskovitses of the mati birthday party in *Suriname Folk-lore* (1936) and I will come back to it in chapter 5. Already schooled in the rules of the mati work, Juliette posed an institutionalized

challenge to the exclusive claims of the steady partner, Martha, on Yaya, the woman who is celebrating her birthday. Juliette was quite precocious.

Juliette's and Yaya's courting occurred in 1921. Hearing these stories, of which Juliette seems to have had an endless supply, I felt excited and blissful. But the stories also evoked a bittersweet melancholy. They speak of working-class women who had been able to build a culture in which they enjoyed and celebrated each other openly, in which they helped each other cope with daily living, sharing hardships and pleasure, and in which there was a lot of sleeping around and teasing. Most of the protagonists in the stories are dead now. The only way in which they can be called to live again, in which we will get to know them and their politics of passion, is by entrusting Juliette's stories to paper.

After Yaya, Juliette, still in her late teens, had another lover, Shanna, who was one year her junior. She says that she loved Shanna most of all the women in her life. She was lovers with her *wan bun tujari*/a good many years. But since they were both very young, there was also a lot of sleeping around and jealousy between them. Once Juliette went to a dance and got very drunk. She did have her eye on a woman there, but was too drunk to be very effective about it. She had put her shoes somewhere in the house and was barefoot. Shanna was told of Juliette being at this party and unexpect-



FIGURE 1.1 Suriname *kottomissies*, women in traditional Afro-Surinamese dress, ca. 1920. KITLV, Leiden, the Netherlands, no. 8828

edly showed up and made her leave. She made Juliette look for her shoes and, when they had found them, at first Shanna carried them, but then she said: "I did not make you take them off, so you carry them yourself." When they got home, Shanna told the drunk Juliette that Juliette could not go to sleep before she had made love to her. Juliette was not up to it.

From my diary of September 19, 1990:

There is an element in the kompe wroko/mati work that reminds me of S&M. This is one example. Another one was when Juliette told me that Shanna at some point did not want to sleep with her anymore. According to Juliette this was because Shanna had another visiti/girlfriend. Juliette said: "Dan en ede at' en; dan a bere at' en, dan en futu at' en. Mi ben nak' a sma baldadig fosi, dan mi ben mek' en sor' mi, fa a ben du nanga en visiti. Dan kan de mi ben nak' en agen. Mi pur' en futuwiri. Ai baya"/Then her head was hurting her; then her belly, then her "foot," i.e., her vagina, was hurting her. First, I hit the shit out of her, then I made her show me how she had done it with her girlfriend. Then maybe I hit her again. I would pull her pubic hair [a deep sigh]. But you know how things like that go; I do not have to tell you anything. She will tell you that it was no big thing. That she did not come and the other one made herself come. "En futu bò saka, mi pikin s'sa. En futu bò saka"/I would make her lust go away, my little sister, I would make it go away.

After the relationship with Shanna ended, because of jealousy and their two pairs of roving eyes, Juliette says that she did not want to get in the *mati wroko* again. She felt hurt and did not like the jealousy and madness of *mati* life.

She continued to work as a domestic, renting a room of her own in a backyard house. When she was eighteen years old, she met Rinaldo, who was in his late twenties, and when I asked her about the nature of this relationship and how being with a man combined with having female lovers, she explained:

"Sensi mi ben de yongu, mi ben aks' Gado fu gi mi pikin. Vooral mi ben wani umapikin. Mi las' pikin. Ma noit' mi ben pur' bere. San Gado ben wan' gi mi, mi ben teki. Yu abi man fanodu, fu gi yu pikin sensi, fu yep' yu pai a yuru, fu bai yu wan japon. Mansma srefi mi no ben lobi, ma di a ben yep' mi, mi ben mus' gi en wan pikinso"/Since I was young, I asked God to give me children. I wanted daughters especially. I lost children, but I never had an abortion. What God wanted to give me, I took. You need a man, to give you some money, to help you pay the rent, to buy you a dress. I did not really like men, but since he was helping me out, i.e., giving me money, I had to give him some.

But, I countered, all those things a woman could have given you too, some money, a nice dress. Exasperated, she replied:

"Dan fa mi bô kis' den pikin? A tru tak' a kan gi mi sensi tu, a kan gi mi yapon, a kan lob' mi. Ma mi ben wani den pikin, den sorgu yu in' yu owru yari. Mansma e go lib' yu, kompe e go lib' yu, ma yu pikin d' o tan ala yu libi"/Then how would I have gotten the children? It is true that she can give me money too, she can give me a dress, she can love me. But I wanted the children, they take care of you in your older years. Men are going to leave you, mati are going to leave you, but your children will stay all your life.

Rinaldo became her steady partner, visiting her regularly, and he fathered her oldest daughter. Having a baby did not mean that Juliette was prepared to give up on going out. One evening she got into a fight with Rinaldo, because he wanted her to stay at home in order to control her movements. In her research on heterosexual relationships in the Creole population Terborg (2002) notes that, at the end of the 1990s, the most serious bone of contention is the man wanting to control the woman's sexuality by proscribing her movements. Many women with steady male partners are not at liberty to come and go as they please, and there is remarkable continuity in the pattern. Juliette could not be bothered with Rinaldo, "a ben wani fu sidon na mi tapu"/he wanted to sit on me. This was also the main reason for her refusal to marry. Disdainfully, she exclaims, her nostrils flaring: "Trow? Suma? Mi? Noit' mi no ben wani trow. Mi na wan sma di altijd lob' mi onafhankelijkheid"/Marry? Who? Me? I never wanted to marry. I am someone who always loved my independence. She did not want to have to put up with a man in her house, who might permit himself all kinds of liberties, like telling her: "No durf fu trap' wan poot na dorosey, dineti"/Don't you dare to put a foot outside this house tonight. In the olden days when a man had told his woman to stay at home and she defied him, choosing instead to go out to a dance, for instance, her friends would warn her, when he turned up at the dance: *Luku, Blaka de*/Watch out, Blackie has come. The woman then would leave by the backdoor and be at home by the time he got back there. Juliette stressed the element of shame for the woman in such an arrangement. Her female friends would make fun of her. She always wanted to come and go as she pleased, and the man she had later in her life never gave her trouble on that score. She is convinced: *Uma koni moro man triki*/Women's smartness outweighs men's antics.

Rinaldo wanted her to stay home and lay down with him, but Juliette refused because "a ben mek' afspraak nanga Ma Joosje"/she had a date with

Ma Joosje, a *bonuman*, a healer in the Winti religion, with whom she was involved at the time. Rinaldo then hit her. As Juliette says: for the first and the last time. He bought her presents to win her back, among others a new coal pot. But she told him, relishing the story as she tells it to me:

"Mi ben de wan sani tu, yere, mi ben de wan brede. Mi ferter' en: a ka kor' patu f' 'i n' e interesseer mi lek' a doosje fu Ma Joosje. So dan a nak' mi agen, ma mi ben brete mi ben fen' reden. Mi ben wan' mi fri"/I was something else, you hear, I was nobody's fool. I told him: that damn coal pot of yours does not interest me as much as Ma Joosje's pussy. So then he hit me again, but I was glad to have found a reason. I wanted my freedom.

The same night she moved out and went to live with Ma Joosje.

When she was young, Juliette's relationship with her own mother was not close. While living with Aunt Anna, her mother sometimes came to visit and brought her a new dress or shoes. Juliette does not tell many stories about her mother, but one story strikes me as significant for reasons that have to do with the debate on dating the emergence of the *mati* work. Once, Juliette, who was then in her early twenties, went to visit her mother with Ma Joosje, who was in her fifties. Her mother was very unpleasant to Ma Joosje and Juliette on that occasion and more or less told them to leave; she did not want to receive them. I initially made the assumption that her mother was against the *mati* work and was not in the life herself. This assumption turned out to be incorrect. In a later conversation Juliette told me she realized when she was older that her mother and another woman who was always around her, Aunt Pauwtje, must have been *mati* too. Aunt Pauwtje was with Juliette's mother from as far back as Juliette can remember. Her mother only objected to Ma Joosje because she had the name to be an *obia* woman, someone who entertains the evil forces of Winti. An important element of this story is that it helps us to date the emergence of the *mati* work before 1900, which is the period most commonly held to mark its emergence. Around 1900 many working-class men left Paramaribo to do migrant labor in the gold and wild rubber industries in the rain forest, leaving women to fend for themselves in the city. Men had unprecedented amounts of money to spend when they returned to the city and prostitution flourished. Working-class women reacted to the commodification of heterosexual relations by upgrading their sense of worth, which was evident in all aspects of Creole culture, proverbs and songs (van Wetering 1998:132). According to this argument, women then started to have sexual relationships with each other. Juliette's mother probably was born in the 1870s or 1880s, and I assume that she would have become sexually active before 1900.

When she was about a year and a half, Juliette's first baby, whom Juliette invariably calls *sargi*¹⁵ Zus, "blessed Zus," died of liver illness. All the other relatives who have died are preceded by *sargi*. There is *sargi* Wanda, her daughter who died at forty years of age. There is also *sargi* Humphrey, the son who, at seventeen, drowned, and finally *sargi* Dorus, her concubine for almost two decades. Juliette was nineteen when the baby fell so seriously ill, and by the time she went to see a doctor for Zus it was already too late.

I ask her whether Ma Joosje stood by her when Zus died. Juliette explains that Joosje could have been her grandmother and that with older women you did not talk that much, that was what you did with your *speri/age*-mates. Ma Joosje was good to her in that she helped Juliette organize her life and helped her financially. Younger women like herself would dance their money away. Juliette was not Ma Joosje's only girlfriend; Ma Joosje had her own *mati* and several young lovers, in addition, and from Juliette's stories she appears to have been in a position in which she thoroughly enjoyed having sex with multiple partners without being possessive or jealous.

Talking about Ma Joosje sent Juliette on a trail of reflections about her preference for older women when she was young:

I always got along well with older women. Mi skin ben de yongu/"My body," "I" was young, was alive. My face did not have wrinkles yet, I had a very round face. They loved me. I did not have sex every day. If I had to count all the older women that I had sex with ... I also could make a pass at her, it wasn't only she who would be after me. When we went to bed, it did not make any difference anymore. She played with me, I played with her. We were equal. But what I do not like, when you are with an older person, you should not be sassy with her. Because you really are not equal. You have to give her respect.

Here, at the end of the quote, besides giving information about the importance of respect in relationships, Juliette was also signifying. By then, December 1990, our conflicting visions of etiquette in a relationship had begun to appear. She thought that I was *vrijpostig/sassy* and she could not believe that I really did not know any better, that I did not know how to behave myself properly as the younger partner in the relationship. She believed that I was willfully not showing her any respect.

I remember the day that this first became apparent to me, a stifling hot day near Christmas when I was ill with malaria.¹⁶ I was so weak that the only way I could continue my work was to interview women at home. Juliette was exceedingly jealous of this trickle of women dropping by and suspected me,

with "my roving eye" to be having it on with some of them. The irony was that at this point I was merely doing my work. It made me furious to be suspected of something I was not doing. Meeting women outside, as my work entailed, was one thing, but having them come to the house was an outright insult in her eyes. By this time she also refused to introduce me to some of her acquaintances whom I wanted to interview because she did not trust me with them. Her fits of jealousy, ranting, raving, and hitting me were hard to bear. We exchanged bitter words, because I felt bad about being ill and loosing time in the first place. In addition to this, she was making my work only harder. When I finally convinced her that her jealousy was unfounded, she made light of the whole episode: "Mi s'sa, ef' yarusu no de bij, dan a no tru lobi"/Sister, if I am not jealous, then it is not true love. She felt that I was always too serious, thinking too much, too argumentative, when she accused me of being unfaithful. To her, it was all part of staging the relationship. I should not answer her back, since that was a sure sign of disrespect. Rather, I should *kor' kor' en/humor*, appease, sweet-talk her. I was no good at that skill.

It became apparent that no woman was exempt from her suspicions, but she strongly applauded it when men came to visit me. In particular, one colleague, a tall, lean, very white Dutch man, was her favorite, and she even advised me to start a relationship with him: You are young and if you want to have a man "kon waka na yu baka, dan mi n' a' trobi. A man kan gi yu wan fef' sensi" /walk after you, then I do not have problems with it. The man can give you some money. I was taken aback: "Aren't you jealous of a man then?" "No," she replied, "with women it is another story, but you can have something with a man." Obviously the Dutchman's color worked in his favor, he had a car and white Dutch men were, in Juliette's worldview—and given the selection mechanisms during a long period of Dutch colonial history she was to a large extent factually correct in this—by definition in a favorable economical position. In short, in her eyes, I should decide to have children with him before it was too late. I was forty; it was still possible. Who would take care of me in my old age, when I did not have children? Our different worlds could not have been juxtaposed more sharply. Retrospectively, I am moved by the fact that she was worried about my future. But at the time I was irritated by her admonitions, which did not resonate at all with my construction of being a woman who loves women. She obviously did not have a conception of me as being able to take care of myself financially. She was giving me the best advice that she had to offer, based on the deeply ingrained notions that women ought to have children and need men for money.

Partners and Children

No tide, no tamara/not today, not tomorrow.

JULIETTE

After blessed Zus died, Juliette was pregnant with twins, but she miscarried. At twenty, finally, she had the daughter, whom I know as mama Matsi. Mama Matsi is indicated as *dosu*, the term used for the child coming after twins. Three different men fathered Zus, the twins, and Matsi, but Juliette lived with none of them. "Mi ben wani pikin, ma ala ten dat' mi ben sribi nanga mansma, mi ben kis' bere gelijk"/I wanted children, but every time I slept with a man, I was pregnant immediately. Those men were too young and troublesome to live with. She wanted them to help her *nanga wan kwartjie*/with a quarter, but she always wanted her freedom, most of all. If they had other women, she did not care. *We, den ben sa abil*/well, they undoubtedly did have (other women), she comments offhandedly. It was important to her to know the fathers of her children, she did not want to do *stukwerk*/sleep with men on a commercial basis, but they should not get any ideas. Since she knew that she was into the *kompe wroko*, she wanted *wan owru p'pa*¹⁷/an older man, who would not bother her too much, who would let her do whatever she wanted to do. And who would not beat her or be jealous, as a young man would likely be. It took her six years to find a man like that. This pattern, too—a younger woman with an appreciably older man—shows historical continuity.

Dorus was a balata bleeder in the rain forest, away from home very often. He was living with Mis' Magda and in a visiting relationship with Mis' Corry when Juliette came into his life. He had children with both Magda and Corry. According to Juliette, he was crazy about her. I ask Juliette what gave her the edge over his other women. She was younger, lighter skinned and more beautiful than they and in the end she had more children with him. Dorus was in his late forties, and she was twenty-five when she started living with him. Dorus and Juliette were together for eighteen years, until he died. They had eight children together.

They had a boy first, Stephan, and when the next child was born, Nancy, he moved in with Juliette. Mis' Magda almost died, she sent one of her daughters, Adriana, to Juliette's house to beg Dorus to come see her. She was miserable. I asked Juliette how she felt about that. Did she empathize with Magda?

Nono. It was Dorus's decision, I did not ask him to come live with me. I was young, "mi no ben prakser' a zaak kwet' kweti"/I did not think about it at all. Whenever I saw Dorus go into some woman's house, I never called him or asked him what he was doing there. I was in the kompe wroko, so I did

not want him to ask me anything either. I myself told him to go see his other women when I was busy doing my own thing.

While in many respects, e.g., her wish for economic independence, for freedom, for not wanting to be "under a man," Juliette has a feminist consciousness, *avant la lettre*, in her relationships with her *meti*/her "cowives," that is, Dorus's other women, it seems, on first sight, strangely lacking. However, there was no animosity among the women. Juliette would sometimes take care of Corry's and Magda's children. One of these children, Cecilia, Corry's daughter, still comes to visit Juliette and brings her fresh bread, every other day, since she works at the bread factory. Magda, Corry, and Dorus have all died a long time ago, but Cecilia considers Juliette kin and vice versa. Thus we see that another bond of kinship was formed, not through heterosexual ties, but through "cowives" who considered each other and each other's children kin. When Dorus would return to town, after having been away in the forest, Juliette wholeheartedly agreed that he had to give some money to her *meti* too. Juliette, having found a reliable, older man who was able to support her and who did not pester her because of her activities with women, was not about to let go of him. Dorus knew that Juliette was in the *mati* work because other people had told him. It was not a topic of much conversation between Dorus and Juliette; it was simply understood.

I am curious whether Dorus ever said anything to Juliette about her female lovers. "Wins' a tak' wan sani, mek' en gwe. Mek' en komopo na mi tapu"/Even if he would have said anything, he should get lost. He should leave me alone. She would not take nonsense from him. One time Dorus came back from the forest, unexpectedly, and Juliette had already made plans to go on an excursion with her friends. She did not want to change her plans for him, so she said, and she later told her girlfriends: "Tide mi no man, tamara m' o weri tumsi, na tra tamara"/Today I cannot, tomorrow I will be too tired, so the day after tomorrow (I will have time for you). Everybody broke up. That became her nickname, *no tide, no tamara*/not today, not tomorrow. Some people, like Cob's brother, would say that to her whenever he saw her, telling her that if she would have said that to him, he would not have stood for it, after being away, *in a kowru, tu wiki*/in the cold, i.e., alone, two weeks. Dorus, according to Juliette, was not mad. Indulging her, he said: "Ga voor je, me schat, go nanga yu mati, i de yongu"/Go, my sugar, go with your mati, you are young.

Sex with Dorus was something she wasn't too excited about, in the first place.

"Mi nanga en no ben de frammejaar so, so dipi-dipi so. Y' e nay, dan y' e opo. Nanga mansma mi no ben de so ge' echt. Ef a aks' mi dineti, dan a no mus'

kon baka di mus' dey. Nanga vriendin, dat ben de trafasi"/Me and him were not so close, so familiar, so deep-deep. You screw, then you get up. I was not so connected to men. If he asked me tonight (to have sex), then he should not come back again in the morning. With a female lover, that was different.

She didn't like oral sex with him, never did it. "Libi mi nanga a morserij dati"/Don't start that dirty stuff with me, is what she says when I query her. If he wanted to do it with her, that was OK. "Mi ben de syat' futu nanga ef' mi nanga Dorus ben speel klaar tegelijkertijd, dan mi ben kis' bere"/I used to come pretty quickly and if Dorus and I came at the same time, then I would be pregnant. The reason that she knew that she was pregnant was that right the next day, her pipe was not tasteful to her any more. She became *duister/*nauseous, and had to extinguish the pipe. She would always try again and if the same thing happened once more, then she knew for sure. She couldn't smoke for about four months, then she would resume.

The transactional nature of sex, which is called *kamra prikti/sexual obligations*, by working-class women, even during pregnancy, is evident here. In exchange for money from men, women give sex. In the first three or four months of her pregnancies she did not feel like having sex with Dorus. "Sex ben de lek' wan dresi in' a ten dati"/Sex was like medicine at that time. In general, she could abstain from having sex with him for a month or two, but since he gave her money that was about the limit and then she had to do it, whether she wanted to or not.

Juliette has her own theory about the widely differing skin colors of her children, who had the same father. Nancy is very light skinned, while Wanda, for instance, was dark. When you conceive just after you have had your menstruation, your belly is very clean and then the child turns out light. But when you are about to have your menstruation and you become pregnant, then the child will be black. She has seen this work in her own experience, and the older women told her that was the way it worked and they were usually right.

Not only did Juliette continue to have relationships with women, she was intimate with her own sexual prowess as well as that of other women. One of Juliette's stories—she must have been in her thirties then—is that one evening she went to see two women who lived in the same backyard. She stayed with one, until midnight, "when the ground was getting wet," and then crept away toward the other and stayed there *te broko dey/*until the day broke. Sometimes at a party, when she was dancing with a woman, they would get so raunchy that they would go home, either to her place or the other woman's, have sex, then wash up and come back to the party again. I asked whether some women did it outside. She said she heard that

some did it *na baka fu plee o was' oso/*in the back of the lavatory or the washing shed, they spread *wan seri/tarpaulin*, "ma fa mi ben wani fu miti a uma" (rubs her hands diagonally together) "mi no ben wani fu du en na dorosey"/but since I wanted to "meet" the woman, I did not want to do it outside. She assumes that the way other women did it was standing up and fingering each other, but "a sani dat' b' o mek' mi moro razend"/that would have made me more crazy.

Juliette's descriptions of her encounters with women are full of joy, naughty. She makes it no secret that she liked women much better than men, that it is *swit' a ben switi/*exceedingly sweet to have sex with a woman. When I ask her to elaborate on her preference and to explain to me why it is that some women like sex with women better and others prefer men, she says:

Some women are easy. They do not like to tire themselves and want to be on their backs only and to come when a man puts his tollie/penis, inside of them. When you are with a woman, both of you are expected to be on top sometimes and to do some work. Some women are like that. It is your "soul," your "I," that makes you so. "Mi yeye no ben wan' de ondro man"/My "soul," "I" did not want to be under a man, it wanted to be with a woman, it is more equal. "Ma mi skin mus' lob' a trawan, a mus' tek' en, no so mi no kan du en"/but my "skin," my "I" has to love the other, has to take her, otherwise I cannot do it.

In this last utterance Juliette is firmly placing herself within the context of the Winti religion. The multiplicitous self is given center stage. It is the "I" that makes some women prefer women and others go for men.

Juliette's understanding of her own sexuality differs radically from the more normative anthropological approaches to the position of women within matrifocality. Whereas the literature depicts women as the losers in this family system or otherwise attributes the origins of mati work to the psychological and physical unavailability of men and their penchant for *buitenvrouwen/*outside women, Juliette gives another impression. She was the piper who called the tune. She consciously chose an older male partner who was very fond of her. He indulged her and thought that she was very beautiful. She wanted to have children and he could give them to her. She was the one who wanted to have female lovers; she set her own schedule to which Dorus had to accommodate. This interpretation that Juliette took all the room she needed to maneuver is borne out by an observation that Dorus made, late in his life. Dorus would sometimes sit at night, on the stoop in front of their house, and look at their big sons, Stephan, Anton, and Simon, getting ready to go out. He would muse: "Luku den bigi boi now, ma noit' te mi ben wani, yu ben gi mi"/Look at those big boys now,

but you never gave me any (sex) when I wanted it. The subtext was, "Look, I gave you those boys"—meaning you will be secure in the future—"but you never gave me sex willingly." Juliette is compassionate with Dorus, but would not have led her life differently. She only regrets that he did not live to see his children into adulthood and did not profit from their taking care of him. They were too young when he died. He never traveled to the Netherlands with her.

When Juliette was in her seventies, she went to the Netherlands for the first time. Her daughter Nancy took her to a Surinamese hairdresser. To Juliette's expert eyes, the hairdresser clearly was in the *mati* work and she would have sought her out, had she been younger and had the hairdresser's *mati* not been present. When Juliette met one of her old cronies at the market in Rotterdam a little while later, they compared notes on Holland. Juliette said: "You know, Helene, they are doing our thing over here, too." "What thing do you mean?" Juliette just rubbed her hand palms diagonally. The two women burst out laughing.

The War Years

Being with a *balata* bleeder or a fisherman, there was not much money to go around. Dorus did not leave any money behind when he left. It was even more difficult to make ends meet during periods of economic crisis, like the Great Depression in the thirties and during World War II, when Suriname, as a colony of the Netherlands, was at war with Germany too. At the beginning of the war, due to Suriname's weak military defense, two thousand American soldiers were stationed in Suriname to safeguard the production of bauxite. Suriname supplied 60 percent of the bauxite needed for the U.S. war industry (Scholtens 1985). Under the influence of the American troops, who had many dollars to spend, the increased importance of bauxite production, the building of defense works, roads, and Zanderij Airport, a short and lopsided economic boom resulted. Favorable for traders, producers, and artisans, the boom was disastrous for people with a fixed income, like civil servants. One third of the population in the city became undernourished. The Committee of Christian Churches in Suriname depicted a period of moral decline during the war years: "a craving for entertainment, licentiousness, alcohol abuse, deterioration of family life, increase of prostitution and STD's" (Scholtens 1985:37).

The war years were not so bad for Juliette and her family, however. Enterprising as she was, she was able, together with one of her neighbors, to secure work as a laundress for the American soldiers at the base at Zanderij. She

was paid in dollars and her weekly earnings easily quadrupled her monthly salary as a domestic. She recalls that an American soldier on a big motorcycle, a Harley Davidson Liberator, once gave her a ride home. After the U.S. soldiers left it was hard going back to domestic service again, with a monthly wage of sf 10. Juliette joined the Surinaamse Sociaal-Democratische Vrouwenbond (Surinamese Social-Democratic Women's Union), which had been founded in 1937 under the leadership of E. J. Temmes (Scholtens 1985:38).

For those women who found work with the American soldiers, either doing laundry, cooking, cleaning, or engaged in sex work, *mati* life went on as usual, and even more luxuriously in the presents they could give each other, jewelry, dresses, parties.

Community Life

"Wan finga nè dring' okro brafu" / One finger does not drink okra soup.

In this section, I will pay attention to the community level of Juliette's life: women's organizations, the street, her membership in *banya* and *susa*—choirs and in her political party. My thesis is that, over the years, Juliette organized her life in such a way that women were centrally present in it, both at an organizational and at a personal level. Her multiple connections with women were enabled by her organizational activities, which were largely patterned by gender.

There are the myriad women's associations of which she was a member and for which Paramaribo is famous. The proliferation and strength of women's voluntary organizations, following the end of slavery, has often been commented upon in the literature (Pierce 1971; Coleridge 1958; Brana-Shute 1976, 1993). Women's organizations with a religious, social, recreational, economic, educational, or political character, or a combination of these elements, have long been part of the Surinamese landscape. The degree and denseness of organization bespeaks the well-known *odo* "Wan finga nè dring' okro brafu" / One finger does not drink okra soup,¹⁸ reflecting the collective insight that one finger is not capable of accomplishing anything; one needs a whole hand¹⁹ (Wekker 1997).

The cluster of ideas behind the organizations—the deeply felt responsibility to support and take care of one another; to be there in matters of love, life, and death; to nurture and to make positive contributions to each other's lives—has continued to this day. Often working-class women were members of three or four organizations at the same time, thus creating an overlapping patchwork of women's networks all over town. The members of the organization often

had the same traditional dress that was worn on special public occasions, such as when the organization celebrated its founding day.²⁰

Organizations had a formal structure. Interestingly, many of these associations had a man as their leader, while the membership was exclusively female. He was the ceremonial leader of the club, but he was not allowed to vote and generally did not have real influence. I tell Juliette that it is hard for me to understand why such *dyadya uma*/sturdy women would take a man as the chair of their organization. She does not see this as a problem; it was just the way things were done. Possibly it was a way of being taken seriously by the outside world, which, in view of the dominant public gender regime, could be done by installing a man as leader; possibly, too, it pointed to an implicit principle of harmony, needing the presence of a male in these all-female endeavors.

The clubs were led by elected officers, called "mothers," who had specific duties, and members, "sisters," were expected to contribute fees regularly. "Mothers" delegated tasks to the other women. There was a *siki moeder* who went to visit the sick members. In addition, a *ronde commissie*/committee that makes the rounds, functioned, and people were asked to volunteer for the positions. Juliette said she could not have done that work, having a lover like Mis' Coba. The women in the committee and the *siki moeder* went to visit the members at home, also to collect their dues, and often, I understood, helping the sick did not stop at pouring tea. It was the activities within the organizations that made me exclaim that it was as if all women did in that time was to lie down together.

Juliette belonged to several groups, e.g., *Blaka Watra*/Black Water,²¹ a dancing association, *Ons Doel*/Our Goal, *Ons Hoekje*/Our Little Corner. With the members saving weekly in the organization, some of the fees were used for recreational purposes: going on excursions together to *Blaka Watra*, *Creola*, or *Carolina*, with lots of good food and *sopi*, alcohol. Frequently, after having walked for four or five hours to their destination, with gear on their head, the women enjoyed themselves with *nyanfaro* or *geflons*/flirting, singing, dancing and *kot' odo*. They often had to stay overnight, which was one of the main attractions. Other activities of the women's organizations included dancing formal dances (*Setdansi*), praying, singing Christian hymns or secular songs, saving in *kasmoni*/rotating credit association. Not all members of these working-class organizations were *mati*, but *mati* and *nonmati* alike shared, to a significant extent, in the same working-class culture.

Juliette's reminiscences about her clubs reminded her of the love triangles that took place, both between women and between men and women. Some of these affairs took a quite violent turn. The male chair of one organization had affairs with two women in the group and had his eye on a third one. Trouble had to come. The *masra*,²² "husband," of one of the women had told

the chair not to show his face at his woman's house anymore, but the chair did not heed his warning. When he went to visit the woman again and was washing up, the "husband" threw a firebomb into the washing quarters and the man burned alive. Juliette was very sorry for the chair to have found such a cruel death.

Her circle of friends also included women in the neighborhood, like Hanna, whom she knew for close to sixty years. Hanna lived a couple of houses down the street and she had a very pretty little face, reminding me of Alice Walker. She was a heavy drinker when she was young. Juliette was very fond of Hanna, in spite of her preference for men. Whenever there was a dance Hanna loved to come and get Juliette to dance with her, because they both loved the way the other danced: *dan un ben bloko*. *Bloko*, literally, *broko*, is breaking, and I suspect that the etymology of the term may have something to do with *bloko a t' te*, deflowering. It is dirty dancing and Juliette, after dancing with Hanna, had to bear her *mati*'s anger. Hanna had an affair with another male chair of an association. Her *meti*/cowife, competitor, was Irma, who *kis' bere f' en*/got pregnant by the chair. There was trouble between Hanna and Irma. Sometimes associations fell apart because of these trials and tribulations of sexual intrigue. According to Juliette's stories, our section of the street was, when she moved there in her early forties, a busy beehive of women, raising children, working as domestics, cleaning and market women, having (itinerant and irregular) male partners, while they also busily engaged in connections with each other. According to Juliette, a good friend with whom you do not sleep is called *kompe*, but the ambiguity of the term was evident from the fact that she often used it when she was speaking of a sexual friendship; she in fact used *mati wroko*, *kompe wroko*, and *uma wroko*/women's work interchangeably. One by one I was told the histories of our neighbors and "suma ben mati nanga suma ben didno zo maar"/who had been in a steady *mati* relationship with whom and who had just had incidental sexual connections with women, without the obligations of the *mati* work. One of her good *kompe* in the street was Elsa. They always stood by each other in difficult times and helped each other:

"Elsa ben wan' didno nanga mi, ma mi no ben wani. Mi ben meki lek' mi no ben ferstan san a ben wani. Sensi mi de, mi ik, mi skin mus' lob' yu, mus' wani fu du en nanga yu"/Elsa wanted to lie down with me, but I did not want to. I pretended that I did not understand what she wanted. Always, my "I," my body, must love you, must want to do it with you.

With other women in the street she would never have started anything sexual, because they dressed and behaved too much like men. In our section

of the street, containing about twenty houses, about half the women had had some kind of sexual history with other women, according to Juliette's reports. It does not seem too far-fetched to conclude that there was a lot of same-sex sexual activity, in the different modalities that mati discern, going on in the street when she was in her middle years, in her thirties and forties. When I lived there in the beginning of the nineties, all these women were in their seventies and eighties; some were in frail health, and there was a lot of mutual visiting and taking care of each other going on. When I once visited an elderly neighbor, Hilda, bringing her some rum and a cigar, Juliette, conscious of her reputation and her past exploits, forbade me to go see *a beest dati*/that "animal" (but meant in good humor, a naughty person) again. Hilda had tried to seduce Juliette; when Juliette had knocked on her door, Hilda was sitting at the top of the stairs, her legs spread, without drawers.

Winti Prey, susa and *banya*—traditional men's and women's dances for the ancestors with all-female choirs accompanying them—often took place outside of Paramaribo and provided another context for Juliette's organizational attachments. Through her relationship with Ma Joosje she learned about the culture. Juliette was an indefatigable singer, always invited to come to cultural events and loved for her stamina, since these events would last the entire night. She knew the lyrics of many songs to call the Winti of the different pantheons to come down and manifest in people: the songs for Mama Aisa, her husband Loko, Sofiabada, a Koromanti of the sky, a heavy Winti, which makes you bleed.

A final source of women in her life was her political party, Nationale Partij Suriname (National Surinamese Party), NPS, which she joined in the fifties, after she had been able to build her house with a loan that the first dark skinned leader of the party, Johan Pengel, made available to his constituency.²³ Women were the main propagandists for the party, canvassing neighborhoods and convincing people to vote for male politicians. The women were often called upon, on short notice, to cook large meals for parties of hundreds of men, to perform all kinds of auxiliary activities from a subordinate position (Brana-Shute 1976, 1993). During my research period, preceding the elections of May 1991, I accompanied Juliette several times to pep rallies at *grun dyari*, literally, "green yard," the NPS party headquarters, and I was struck by the gendered scenarios played out in public: the men were on the podium, pontificating, showing off their verbal skills, joking, grandstanding, and the women in the audience, working, serving, clamoring, applauding them. A telling incident occurred after one of those rallies; a group of about twenty-five women, including Mis' Juliette and me, had been picked up by a party bus in our neighborhood, but after the rally we found out that the bus was now needed for male party brass and that it was up to us,

near midnight, to see how we would get home. None of the neighborhood women, who otherwise were never at a loss for words, protested against this treatment. When Juliette and I got home that night, having walked for about an hour and a half, and discussed the event, she forcefully defended the party, understanding that the bus was needed for more important people than us and that it must have been an emergency. It again marked a moment when gendered and classed differences were operative. Neither in the past, nor in the present has the large female presence in the party translated into commensurate public, female political power or attention to women's articulated concerns (Wekker 1997, 2001).

Mis' Coba and the Later Years

"Ef' yarusu no de bij, dan a no trutru lobi"/If jealousy does not play a part, then it is not true love.

JULIETTE

While Dorus was still alive the family moved to the street where Juliette has been living for forty-five years. Through her endless activities, planning carefully, saving in *kasmoni*, and with the help of her male children when they got older, she was able to buy a plot of land and eventually build her own house. The house is a one-story wooden structure consisting of two bedrooms, a large living room, a kitchen and a washing area. On birthdays and ritual events Juliette is able to receive large numbers of people in the areas to the side and the back of the house, which are paved with concrete. Located in a working-class Creole neighborhood, one of the traditional strongholds of the Nationale Partij Suriname, Juliette's living room is presided over by a large portrait of Johan Adolf Pengel, affectionately called Jopie, erstwhile leader of the NPS. On the portrait, his large palms outstretched, Jopie, a heavy, dark-skinned Creole, urges his followers: "Wacht even, weest gerust, alles komt terecht"/Wait a little bit, be assured, everything will be all right. This is a message that has become increasingly inappropriate over the past decades, but in his political apogee (1958—1969) Pengel and his party made it possible for Juliette and her neighbors to buy plots of land by extending loans to them. Pengel and the political leader who followed him, Henck Arron, are the closest Juliette comes to worshipping men. Under Pengel clientelism became a prominent feature of the political system and, as the spoils extended to loyal party members, Juliette became a cleaning woman in government service. She not only had medical insurance for herself and her children but also built up a pension, which in 1990 amounted to sf 75 a

month. In addition to that, she received the \$110 governmental allowance to which all elderly people, above sixty-five years, were entitled. There was no way that people could survive on this income, however, so Juliette was fortunate and successful in the fact that she had children in the Netherlands who supported her.

Across the street from Juliette lived Mis' Coba, with her daughter and numerous grandchildren. Coba had had her eye on Juliette for a long time and, even though friends warned her not to start with Coba, because she had *takru maniri*/ugly ways, Coba insistently courted her and Juliette gave in. This relationship started when they were both forty years old and ended when they were eighty.

When they meet in the streets or on the market, they just nod at each other and say hi: "Dag Juliette," "Dag Coba." It is only after several months that Juliette points Coba out to me as her former *mati*. When I ask what was the reason that they broke up after forty years, I get different answers. One reason she mentions is that Coba gave herself all kinds of liberties, like having other women, while Juliette could not do anything of the sort. Coba also liked picking fights in public with Juliette. Moreover, she liked to put herself above Juliette. Even Coba's brother could understand it when Juliette broke the relationship off after forty years, saying that Juliette had put up with enough.

Juliette does not like talking about Mis' Coba. The only remarks she volunteers are that Coba's spirits *no mu' kon lul mi*/must not come and harass me after Coba dies. She explains that that will never happen, anyway; since Coba and she never made *sjweri ef verbontu*/an oath or "association," i.e., taking an oath that you will never sleep with another person again till death do you part. She has heard stories about *matisma* who did this; it brings disaster because it also entails that after one partner dies the other cannot take another lover, since the yeye of your dead lover will come haunt and trouble you.

In the course of different conversations more pieces of the puzzle of her relationship with Coba accumulate, and it is interesting that Juliette's explanations about the reasons for the breakup fit into two different discourses: there is a Winti discourse and a Christian discourse. She is, at times, remorseful about the relationship; she should have ended it much sooner. But being together for so long, *y' e tron famiri*/you become family. In the same way that, when starting a relationship, her yeye /her "soul," had to "take," like, be in harmony with the other person, so her yeye got fed up with Coba. Juliette's yeye, in their plural form, that is the male and female parts, had been humiliated so many times they did not want Coba anymore. At other times the remorse is clothed in terms of a Christian discourse: God does not approve of *mati* relationships, but when you are young you do not have any

business with that: your blood is boiling, you are not made out of wood, so you just go ahead and do it with women. Before Juliette and I embarked on our relationship, she had told me:

"Di mi ben yongu, mi ben lob' fu ab' prisiri. Yu de yongu, y' e sport. Ma now mi kon grani, m' e kon verander. Fu a uma wroko di mi ben du, ala neti m' e begi Gado pardon. Gado no poti umasma nanga umasma makandra. Gado poti umasma nanga mansma makandra. Gado poti Adam nanga Eva makandra, dan sneki kon verlei Eva, a ben nyan apra. Mi ben sie na in' na Buku"/When I was young, I loved having fun. You are young, you are "sporting," painting the town red. But now that I have grown old I have changed. For the mati work that I have done, every night I am praying God to forgive me. God did not put woman together with woman. God put woman and man together. God put Adam and Eve together, then the snake came and seduced Eve, she ate the apple. I saw it in the Book, the Bible.

Here we see two discourses, which at first sight seem to converge in rejecting same-sex sexual behavior, but there is an important difference; while the Afro-Surinamese Winti discourse captures the ending of the relationship in terms of Juliette's yeye not "taking," not tolerating Coba's yeye anymore, it does not reject same-sex behavior tout court. It was this particular person, Coba, that Juliette's yeye did not want to live with anymore. The superseding Christian discourse is far more punishing, demanding, and oppressive: it brings her to ask God every night for forgiveness for her sexual behavior with women. The behavior, that, as we have seen, she so enjoyed, that gave her immense pleasure in her life, and that, in a very real sense, made her survive, is deemed unacceptable. Even though there are varieties of Christianity in Suriname, some stricter than others, some more inclined toward syncretism than others, in general, the dismissal of homosexuality would seem a firm article of faith for all currents. The Christian discourse is a (re-)colonizing discourse that dismisses same-sex behavior out of hand, while it goes without saying that Christianity rejects Winti and its *afkodrey*/idolatry, in the same movement. Both discourses held validity for Juliette: with the prospect of appearing before His throne, she deemed it wiser to end the relationship with Coba. These same discourses still circulate among younger *mati*, as we will see in chapter 6. When I appeared in her life, however, and she felt attracted to me, she was confronted with a dilemma she had not believed would occur anymore: she thought that she had finished with the *mati* work. She had her own internal struggles, which she did not fully share with me but the contours of which I could sometimes discern. In her own way she was negotiating her desire. In the end, luckily, the Winti discourse won, enabling her to enjoy her last *mati*

relationship with me. As I will elaborate more fully in chapter 3, Winti is an enabling discourse, opening up possibilities for people, while Christianity is forbidding, limiting, exclusionary, dismissing same-sex behavior and offering people who like to engage in it a negative self-image.

As the *work* in mati work suggests, Juliette and Coba had mutual obligations. They helped each other raise their dependent (grand-)children, they shared resources, helping each other financially. They shared a market booth, selling fish and fruit, until they were in their seventies. When one bought fabric for a new dress, she made sure to get enough so that her mati could get a dress too. Juliette felt that Coba did not live up to her side of the deal, she was often miserly and did not like to spend money on Juliette; Juliette felt that she took better care of Coba than the other way around. Coba also did not come up to Juliette's expectations in days of grief; when her daughter Wanda died Coba should have supported Juliette, should have sat with her and helped with expenses. Instead, neighbor Elsa, Juliette's kompe, did all those things. Coba and Juliette also had sexual obligations, the kamra prikti, that feature in both same-sex and opposite-sex spheres, where one's partner has to oblige the other's sexual desires. Absent that, one is entitled to seek gratification elsewhere.²⁴

Although Juliette continued to enjoy her life in the four decades that she remained with Coba, jealousy is a constant theme in her accounts of those years. Juliette says because Coba was "stealing" all the time, she herself did not want to stay behind. There is no knowing whether this is the correct story; much as I wanted to, I could not interview Coba, given my relationship with Juliette and the distress this would have caused her. One characteristic story unfolded, when they were both in their fifties. Coba was seeing someone else and Juliette also took another *visiti*/girlfriend:

"A dame ben rij wan fiets. Wan dey, mi no sab' suma ben ferter' Coba, a dame ben kon fu si mi, en fiets ben de na nengredoro, dan plotseling Coba ben kon ooktu. A kon storm na ini, a sidon nanga begin fu kos' a dame nanga beledig en. A taki Juliette, we, mi moi moro yu mati, yere. Mi no ben tak' noti. Mi ben sab' ef' mi pik' en, feti o de. Mi ben prakseri: yu no sabi ef' yu moi moro en, yu n' e tek' en na yu bedi. A dame ben de moro yongu, ooktu. A dame tenapu, di a' e gwe, a' e taki: We, Juliette, later, no? Coba ati ben bron so te?/The lady had a bicycle. One day, I do not know who told Coba, the lady had come to visit me, her bicycle was at the gate,²⁵ then suddenly Coba came in, too. She came storming in, she sat down and began to curse and insult the lady. She said: "Well, Juliette, I am prettier than your mati." I did not say anything. I knew that if I answered her we would have a fight. I thought: you do not know whether you are prettier than she, you don't take her to bed. The

lady was younger [than us], too. The lady got up, as she was leaving, she said: Well, Juliette, [I'll see you] later, no? Coba was furious.

A couple of days later, Juliette's friend attended a *Winti Prey*/a Winti gathering in which the spirits are called up, which could only be reached by boat. The boat sunk and she could not swim, so she and a boy drowned. That day a neighbor came by Juliette's house and asked: "Did you hear that so-and-so drowned?" Juliette was sitting on her doorstep with Coba and she saw Coba looking at her, at how she would react, so she did not show any of her emotions, though she was terribly shaken. She had seen the woman shortly before she left on the boat and knew she was going to the Winti Prey. "Doro-doro Coba ben tanteer' mi fu a uma"/Continuously Coba was nagging me because of the woman. Juliette wore mourning clothes, a blue dress and a white anyisa, for her friend, but Coba did not want her to wear blue, because then everybody would know that she and the woman had been close. Shortly afterward there was to be a *Prey* and Juliette did not feel like going at all. But Coba put a lot of pressure on her and also wanted her to wear a red dress, since the Prey was for the Amerindian spirits, who wear red trousers or dresses themselves and love for their children to wear the same color. She quarreled with Juliette the entire day. Meanwhile, Juliette says, Coba had a girlfriend at the very same time. She had heard that Coba was meeting her friend on the corner of Willem Campanjestraat, *fu beslis*/to make a date. "Well, when I saw Coba on that corner, I had taken a can with me, an empty butter can, and I hit her on her head with it. Blood flowed." Juliette is still bitter about it after thirty years:

"Na Coba zaak, kis' en moi. A ben kon na mi oso, ma mi no ben dres' en ede. A no ben kan go n' en oso, bika en masra ben de d' ape"/That was Coba's business, served her right. She came to my house, but I did not help her to bandage her head. She could not go to her own house, because her man was there.

Juliette has many other narratives like this one, fraught with jealousy and violence, describing the longest relationship she had in her life. It shows, first, that Coba's man was not as accommodating and indulging toward her as Dorus was toward Juliette. Coba knew better than to go home with a bleeding head. Second, the culturally sanctioned form and direction that jealousy takes and the violence that comes into play with it become transparent. When Juliette talks about jealousy, she opens windows onto different worlds, depending on whether it was her man or her woman who had been unfaithful. She did not mind when Dorus went to see other women. Frankly, she thought: Well, it is better that he harasses her than me.

She also did not mind when her mati lay down with a man. If she could find some money with him, why not? But neither she nor Coba would stand for it when the other slept with another woman. Yet, this occurred on a fairly regular basis. Having interviewed numerous mati of different generations, I concluded that having multiple sexual partners is still part and parcel of the mati work. Sometimes it is considered the prerogative of the dominant partner, and some women argue that when she does it it is less serious, because it is more "natural." When the "feminine" partner sleeps with someone else or is suspected of it, it is a serious blow to the self-esteem of the "male" partner. Coba and Juliette did not have a relationship in which the roles were clearly demarcated as male and female; in practice both partners had sex with others. Jealousy is often taken as a sign of true love: if you are not jealous, when your partner sleeps with someone else (of the pertinent sex), then what kind of love is this? Jealousy and violence are as much part of the intimate landscape of the mati work as are love, obligations, friendship, and companionship. Jealousy and violence are operative in both same-sex and in opposite-sex spheres.

Part of Juliette's politics of passion became transparent when she was having sex with someone else: *di a ben mati*/when she was in a steady relationship, and she felt she wanted to sleep with somebody else, she would *bedank mi visiti*/thank my lover, i.e., end the relationship. This was only a temporary measure, however, and when she had satisfied her curiosity—and whatever else—she would return to her mati. The point of honor to her was never to give the woman she was having an affair with *ede na tap' mi visiti*/a place above my mati, humiliate my mati in favor of the incidental contact.

In the course of their forty years together, Juliette's children and Coba's grandchildren became family who still now visit each other, both in Suriname and in the Netherlands. I have interviewed one of Coba's grandchildren, herself in the mati work, about the relationship between Juliette and Coba. Jet was thirty-nine when I met her in 1990, and she is named after Juliette. She looks back with pleasure on the years of her youth:

Since I have grown older and am in the mati work myself, I have realized that my grandmother and Aunt Juliette were "friends of the heart." I did not see it like that as a child. They had an ideal to support each other and to stay together for life. Grandmother was very strict, but all of us children loved Aunt Juliette, because she had a soft heart. We could get things done by talking to her first and then she would persuade grandma that it was all right. Both of them were our mothers.

Reading Juliette Within the Context of Working-Class Culture

What is the place of the story within Juliette's life?

I want to come back to the questions I formulated earlier: what is the place of the story *within* Juliette's life? in other words, how does she use her narrative to construct and project a particular persona? And what are the characteristics of that persona? It is useful to come back to the three levels by which she ordered the narration of her life: the personal, the collective and, finally, the national and global level. Most of her narrative centered on the first and second levels. On the personal level she projected a story of an attractive, precocious girl child who loved the company of older women and who grew into an adult who preferred to be surrounded by women. She was proud of the numbers of women with whom she had connected sexually, as proud as she was of her large *bere*/the children and grandchildren she had produced. There is continuity in those stories and their corollaries are the utterances concerning her not feeling connected to men, her rejection of marriage, her seeking and finding an older male partner who was able to support her financially, give her children, and not beat her or cramp her life with women. Juliette projected the persona of a responsible adult woman, embodying cultural ideals, in the ways in which she dealt with her mati, Magda and Corry, and their children, who became kin. So did her former mati and their (grand-)children. Central values that guided her life were to live well with others, both with her mati, with nonsexual friends, with family and neighbors, but also, equally important, with the Gods and spirits that carried her. She worked for spiritual balance for herself, her (grand-)children, and people who asked her advice. From an early age she worked hard to support her family economically, and this continued until she could enjoy the support of her adult children. In her home Juliette organized her life so that women could be central to it.

Straddling the personal and the collective level is her sexual self. She self-presented to me as someone who is sexually savvy, had considerable prowess, experience, and skills; someone who was attractive and sought after, first by older women and then by her peers; someone who was fun to be with, naughty, could tell good, tall tales. But also someone who was respectful and who had good mati manners. If she had fifteen cents, she would share it with her mati; if she bought fabric for a dress, her mati would get one too. She would not think of withholding a child that she had given birth to from her mati who wanted to raise the child. None of her ex-mati had any reason

to bear grudges against her after they split up. This was important to her, to prevent the situation that the spirits of a deceased, disgruntled mati might come trouble her.

On the collective level her narrative invoked a person who was loved and appreciated, both because of her personality and because of her cultural capital. She had valued cultural knowledge and healing powers and she gave others advice in matters of love, life, sickness, and death. She sang and danced indefatigably at Winti Prey, susa and banya. Her membership in women's organizations, also spoke significantly to working-class cultural ideals of cooperation, mutual help, and the accomplishment of common goals. Her membership, again, enabled her to be surrounded by women.

Juliette's narrative spoke less to the national and global levels, although there surely were elements present, such as her membership in the NPS political party and the union of domestics, but also her encounter with American soldiers during World War II and her travels to the Netherlands. She could have foregrounded those elements, had she so chosen.

It is no coincidence that she did not stress the national and global levels in her narrative; Juliette used her narrative to project a persona who embodied, to a significant extent, the idealtypical working-class dyadya uma, the sturdy, real, woman who knows how to manage her own life and that of those around her, politically, economically, emotionally, culturally, religiously, and sexually. The sites in which the dyadya uma operated, for women of Juliette's generation, were overwhelmingly the home and the community. As we will see in chapter 6 on the globalization of the mati work, younger mati use the global as their field of operation much more intensely. Since the independence of Suriname (1975), the mati work has moved to the Netherlands and forms part of the transatlantic exchanges constituting Suriname and the Netherlands. Thus the three levels are not in themselves gendered, but there is a difference in the degree of involvement at each level for different generations. The characteristics of a dyadya uma will be laid out in more detail in chapter 3. It is worth noting that, within working-class culture, Juliette did not need to make amends for her sexual activities but could fully embody cultural ideals.

Epilogue

I was no good at the rules of her game and she did not see any honor in mine.

GLORIA

The multifaceted relationship I developed with Misi Juliette has been pivotal in my understanding of the mati work. In my diary of March 1991 I wrote:

I stayed home today to get all kinds of things done, but can't say I was very productive. Have mainly been chatting with Juliette. We talked about how it will be when I move back to L.A. again in July. It made me very sad and she noticed it and said that I should not cry. She is so beautiful and wise. I do feel utterly safe with her and when, as last night, she is sitting with me and chatting a mile a minute, while I am working on my paper, my whole heart melts for her and I find myself wishing and expressing to her that she was forty-five years old again. She said that if we would have been the same age, we would have stayed together all of our lives. I told her that I love her as my mother, and that that is really not a bad thing, because it will last forever. We have become family. She said that she knew that, but that she loves me more than I love her, since I am her last mati. After me she will take no other lover and she knows that I will.

But times were not always so edenic. In fact, in hindsight I learned most intensely on occasions of conflict and misunderstanding, moments when my ideas and values as a Europe-centered lesbian sharply clashed with her mati world. Inadvertently I caused wounds and a cultural crisis by my, in her eyes, unspeakable behavior. Shortly before I wrote the above entry, I met Delani McDonald, a thirty-eight-year-old schoolteacher, and I thought that it would be possible to openly have a relationship with her, because I had now defined my relationship with Juliette as family. Although I suspected that it would be no simple matter, I still believed that as long as I was clear about my feelings, and if I took care to keep on spending considerable time with Juliette, it would have been possible. My attitude baffled and scandalized Juliette, and this she made clear in no uncertain terms.

In Juliette's view I was still her last mati, her little "chicken," whom she spoiled mercilessly, but in return for which she demanded absolute fidelity. And if she could not have absolute fidelity, she wanted me to hide artfully my other liaison from her. Delani was not to come to my house or to parties and events that Juliette and I attended. Delani's attempts to be on good terms with Juliette, by sending over a bouquet of flowers and fruit on her birthday, were met with flat refusal: the flowers were immediately thrown in the trashcan. Unfortunately, there were some *lemki*/little limes,²⁶ in the basket, which Juliette read as a sure sign of Delani's bad faith: her wish for the relationship between Juliette and me to go sour.

My job, the prescribed way of placating Juliette, was to make her feel that my eyes were on her only, whatever it took. I could not do that. Her jealousy drove me crazy, my "roving eye" made her furious, wanting to beat me up, although she was so tiny and fragile. I was no good at the rules of her game and she did not see any honor in mine. She always thought that I really knew

better, that I was willfully violating mati codes. For my part, I was desperately groping to make her see my view of the situation. She exposed me, on several occasions, for behaving callously and selfishly toward her, of behaving like a man—the ultimate putdown—when I thought I was merely being my own autonomous self, putting a lot of store in a situated and, under the circumstances, myopic version of being “transparent and honest.” I often thought of Adrienne Rich’s words in her noteworthy essay “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying”:

An honorable human relationship—that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word “love”—is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other.... And so we must take seriously the question of truthfulness between women, truthfulness among women... so that lying (described as *discretion*) becomes an easy way to avoid conflict or complication? Can it become a strategy so ingrained that it is used even with close friends and lovers?

(1979:188–190)

These insights were of little help, indeed counterproductive, in my situation. Juliette and I shared some important aspects and values of a same-sexed universe, but others we decidedly did not.

I became sharply aware that we both inhabited a *specific* same-sexed sexual space. Not only did I thus learn about her world, I also came to see characteristic aspects of my own construction of sexuality. Knowledge about the proper ways to embark upon and to end a relationship, which I so took for granted, is deeply culturally inflected. There can be no doubt that “same-sexual activities in distant cultural settings are *not* transparently comparable to such relationships at home” (Lewin 2002:114). It was in the domain of how to end a relationship that I fell most seriously short of Juliette’s norms because, according to her, I gave *Delani ede na tap’ en*/placed Delani above her. I had humiliated Juliette. Juliette reproached me with never having formally ended the relationship with her, after which I could have had sex with Delani and then returned to Juliette. She preferred to see Delani as an incidental sexual interest and continued to treat me as her mati, because I had not followed the culturally prescribed way to end the relationship: *mi no ben bedank en*/I had not “thanked” her, temporarily ended the relationship. She felt very strongly about the fact that she had been there first, before Delani; since I had not ended the relationship with her, it was still going on, as far as she was concerned.

I preferred to blur the fact that my sexual relationship with Juliette had ended. I did not want to have sex with her anymore, but, apart from that, I did not want to end or change my relationship with her at all. I wanted two

simultaneous relationships, with her and with Delani. In a typically boundary-blurring mode, however, I did not want to openly state that. It was too painful to tell her that the sexual part of our relationship had ended.

Further intercultural puzzles were presented by the cultural markers that indicate one is in a relationship with another woman, by the different modalities in which one can relate to another woman, the proper ways to deal with one’s mati—which, to me, seemed oppressive, violent, and insincere at times—or about the best techniques to have sex with a woman; all this I learned and all this was different from the knowledge I possessed. My relationship with Juliette confronted me with my ageism, my preconception that an octogenarian would not be interested in sex, would not be jealous, would willingly and wholeheartedly give me the space I wanted. I also came to see that my preferred configuration of autonomy, transparency, and sexual freedom was, from the perspective of the mati work, highly situated, individualistic, self-centered, and really untenable.

In the end, Juliette, Delani, and I were, not without struggle, able to come to terms and to live with ourselves and each other. I learned a bit of *kor’kori/sweet-talking*, humoring her; she, being always right, stated that she did not have to learn or change anything. When I behaved in a decent and respectful mati way, that is, kept Delani out of her sight as much as possible, she was quite pleased. But gradually she indulged me by consenting to Delani’s more frequent presence. Again, food played a symbolical role in the process of rapprochement between Juliette and Delani. While for months Juliette refused to feed Delani when she came to visit me, she eventually would give her food, too, although naturally she would not serve her. Juliette made sure that there was enough food on my plate so that I could share it with Delani. Sleeping arrangements were another issue when the three of us were together, either in Paramaribo or later in Amsterdam. Invariably I slept in Juliette’s bed, giving her *ede na tap’ Delani*/honoring her above Delani. In the end I became her daughter again. We have continued to share important moments, joy and grief, in each other’s lives, by telephone, letters, and by mutual visits. Juliette was present in Amsterdam when my Dutch book *Ik ben een gouden Munt* was launched in September 1994. So were her sons and daughters and several of her grandchildren, living in the Netherlands, who have become my family. She always reminded me in telephone conversations that I had left Suriname just in time and that it was because of her that I did not end up dead, by getting myself in deep trouble with *den wenke*/the girls, through my lousy mati manners. I never quite measured up, in that respect, to her standards.

I last saw Juliette in December 1997 in Paramaribo, when she was already ill and weakened, small as a twelve year old in her pink housecoat. Her face

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