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Politics & Passion: A Conversation with Gloria Wekker

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Abstract

In *The Politics of Passion* (Wekker 2006), anthropologist Gloria Wekker broke new ground in presenting an analysis of Mati Work, a surviving historical practice among Afro-Surinamese working-class women who create families from relationships that are not limited to blood ties, or a choice between heterosexuality or homosexuality. Her account offered a rare, thoughtful consideration of a complex Caribbean sexual culture, and continues to challenge conventional knowledges and practices of researchers, rights advocates and policy makers engaged in the struggle for sexual justice. In April 2009, Professor Wekker and I met at her home in Amsterdam—where she is both Chair in Gender and Ethnicity Studies at the Faculty of Arts at Utrecht University and Director of the Centre of Expertise on Gender, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism—and shared our thoughts about some contemporary debates and questions her work informs and inspires.

Sex and sexuality are still not easily spoken about in Caribbean Gender Studies, despite contributions like yours and M. Jacqui Alexander's that have invigorated the field. Why do you think that there is still not a broad and engaged conversation about sex among Caribbean feminists—especially one about same-sex sexualities, heteronormativity and sexual rights?

GW: I think it's broader than just Caribbean feminists, because I think it's also true for African-American feminists. Hortense Spillers' observation in the early 1980s that black women are like "the beached whales of the sexual universe", that they're not speaking, but awaiting their verb, still holds true. Since that time I really don't think that we've had much scholarship filling in that huge gap. Recently, I was looking at the book *Longing to Tell: Black women talk about Sexuality and Intimacy* (2004) by Tricia Rose. But this is a bunch of interviews with women of different ages talking about their sexual experiences but it doesn't really theorize anything. The same is true for *Tongues on Fire: Caribbean Lesbian Lives and Stories*, edited by Rosamund Elwin (1997). However much I appreciate those stories—and there is a lot of pain in them—but it doesn't go very deep. I think Darlene Clark's insights are correct when she talks about how come it became so important for black women to don a cloak of asexuality because of the history of black women being raped, black women being defined as unrape-able, always already ready to have sex. So black women decided they had to be asexual, to perform asexuality. I think that has played a huge role for a long time.

When I think about the Caribbean specifically, I think there is also some of the same processes going on there. Religion also plays a part in making it not decent, not a decent topic to talk about it. There is still very much a sense that "nice girls don't like sex, and nice girls don't talk about sex." We find more of a sexual voice in literature, in fiction, but not so much in academic, scholarly work.

***The Politics of Passion* provided a sexual voice for Afro-Surinamese women in academic literature, for the first time in this way.**

GW: And the book has sometimes been received in a hostile manner because of its representation of sexuality. While *Politics* has been warmly and enthusiastically embraced by many different constituencies, I would say—in some of the talks I've given—for instance, for the Caribbean Studies Association, some men have a very hard time dealing with the study because it depicts women in a way that doesn't make them victims. *Politics* gives agency to women, and describes how they ordered the world sexually. On some other occasions when I have given talks where the audiences largely were women, there has also been a hostile reaction. At one talk in Barbados, very religious women, middle-class women, for whom it was also very difficult to talk about sexuality, found it difficult to hear it addressed. In a limited sense, there's truth in Peter Wilson's thesis that "men go by reputation, and women go by respect." And then there are, of course, the Afrocentric constituencies, who deny that same-sex sexualities are an African thing, so that all in all there are lots of different reasons for some hostile reactions to my book.

How were you able, then, to resist this contention, this pressure, in undertaking your own work?

GW: First, I am coming from the Netherlands, coming from a sexual culture that has been very open in Amsterdam. I was socialized in this kind of cultural space in the 1970s and 1980s. Here, sex was very openly talked about and people were experimenting with new forms of being a sexual being. There was so much experimentation that jealousy was out of the question! When I then pursued my PhD in the United States, some people weren't enthusiastic about my topic, and several people really implored me not to write so openly and centrally about sexuality—even some members of my committee. Rather than sex, they wanted me to focus my work on other ingredients that were also there, that I had collected data on: the economic side, how did women survive, etc. But I felt like and insisted that sexuality is what I wanted to study. I came all this way to the United States because I couldn't do it in the Netherlands, because there were no Black studies [t]here, and hardly any lesbian studies. But it's this particular combination that enabled me to do this study, to produce a theory to think about black sexuality in the diaspora. I'm doubtful that I would have gotten the money and the mentorship that I got in the US. But the kinds of questions that I asked, and the fact that I was able to do that, put all the ins and outs of the issue on the table, so to speak—that is my Dutch background.

Your comfort with speaking about sex and sexuality is made known to readers quite early in *The Politics of Passion*, when you begin to describe your relationship with the text's main subject, Juliette. Whenever I have used this book in graduate courses, students always linger on this aspect of your study, with some of them quite clearly anxious about it. Why do you think your frank and transparent explanation of your relationship generates this kind of response?

GW: Well, a combination of reasons. One is of course there is still a positivistic atmosphere in which we operate. We are still not supposed to have any personal biases, we are not supposed to show the "I" that is doing the research. The "I" should be bracketed, should be kept out of sight. In *Politics*, the "I" is not only showing herself but also really claiming that if you are transparent about the ways in which you position yourself, including the sexual positions you occupy, that you produce better knowledge. I think I'm showing that—that I couldn't have known all the stuff that I've come to know about the Mati Work if I wouldn't have had this relationship with Juliette.

It's the positivistic climate that still surrounds us, and surrounds those students and produces us, but there is also a specific division of labour in which women anthropologists can talk about gender, but male anthropologists can talk about sex. So I'm breaking through those binaries in that I'm talking about sex. Men have always been allowed to talk about sex that they've had in the field—starting with Malinowski, for instance. Other men have had the possibility to be sexual beings in the field. But when you look at some of the books that came out, let's say, in the 80s about self and gender and sex in the field—the books that anthropologists read to get to know more about how their colleagues act in the field, what it is like do field work, whether you are allowed to be a sexual being, this is the message that you get—you better not be sexual as a woman

because you will be put down as a “field groupie.” You will be seen as someone who is not serious, even while there is much more space for men to explore that, and be taken seriously.

Lesbian Studies and Gay Studies also maintain this binary. That’s why the grouping of the two has been called an unhappy marriage, by Ellen Lewin in *Out in Theory* (2002). As she points out, Gay Studies has engaged with sexuality, but Lesbian Studies has engaged more with gender. And so whatever it is that lesbians do sexually, we don’t get a very clear view of it. I’m pretty much doing away with all these binaries, which keep repeating a particular way of looking at the world and I think that’s what upsets [some] students.

This gendered division extends beyond the classroom, beyond scholarship.

GW: When I think of some of my white gay male friends, they have been very enthusiastic about the way that I describe my relationship with Juliette. They told me they wanted more sex! (I replied that this was the best I could do!) And again I have come across women, both white women and women of colour, who found it difficult to deal with. And also religious women who have had difficulty dealing with the fact that I openly discussed my relationship with Juliette. There is a bunch of difficulty involved in acknowledging how women can be sexual persons, and acknowledging same-sex relations makes it even more difficult, especially in a Caribbean context. You know all those painful images that are out there circulating about black women are still haunting us.

Do you think we have really begun to grapple with the way in which those images haunt us, the continuing effect—the damage—of colonialism in shaping our sex and our ideas of sex and sexuality?

GW: Absolutely not, I think that would be a very necessary next step to take. The work that I started to do after *Politics* examines the Dutch cultural archive, but I absolutely feel that comparable work that goes deeper into the Caribbean cultural archive really needs to be done. The ways in which race, gender, sexuality, nation, class, have gotten deposited in our archives. I’m talking about “cultural archive” in the sense that Edward Said uses it in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), as a structure of feeling, a structure of knowing, of affect. Layer upon layer of images have gotten deposited in that cultural archive, and we never have looked closely at them, at how those images and knowledges have formed us. I think it’s absolutely necessary to look into how they are not serving us, not serving us at all, as Audre Lorde would say. The austere ways in which sexuality is often dealt with, is often coloured locally. In different places, they have different forms. For example, I’m always struck by the punitive ways in which people with HIV/AIDS are treated in black communities like in the US, but also in the Caribbean. People with HIV/AIDS are told “you brought it on yourself”; that “you must be gay” or “you must have swung both ways”; that “you have been drug using”. They are told: “however you got it, it’s your own fault” for making an immoral choice. That’s a very prominent discourse which

exposes the lack of generosity that we have toward ourselves, and toward particular ways of expressing oneself sexually.

We would also seem to continue to respect the parcelling work of colonialism. I am struck by the commitment of even very critical and interrogative scholars to ethnic and racial compartments, at the expense of recognizing the dynamic present and history of the Caribbean. A lot of the emerging studies of Caribbean sexuality, for instance, leave completely unconsidered the experience of Indo-Caribbean people and indentureship.

GW: What you suggest is so true. We have been so taught in Caribbean studies to look at the different population groups in this kind of way, and not to look: “well but what did they develop amongst themselves and how did they interact?” It’s so reductive to only look like this. We have been missing out on a lot as a result.

In *Politics*, you were primarily concerned with the experience of Afro-Surinamese women and in relation to an on-going set of questions that consider the African diasporic experience, but yet you stumbled into Hindu women who were also engaged in Mati Work. Have you given more thought to how these women, and perhaps indentureship, informed sexual cultures like Mati Work?

GW: I was trained in the old-fashioned way in Caribbean studies that I was going to look at Creoles, not at other groups. So I stumbled across these other groups in looking at the Creoles. What I’ve been thinking about is that, as I understand it, there was a time when Hindustani women, when they first arrived in Suriname, many of them came independently. They came, for instance, to escape undesirable and oppressive relationships, or they came with their lovers. They may even have come in a group of girlfriends, who knows? I’m imagining that, but I’m thinking that the grounds would have been very fertile for women to say “we’re not just going to put up with any kind of relationship that we may have had in India. We have not travelled all these 5,000 miles to come to Suriname and to again be involved in oppressive relationships.” So there is some material that points that out, that points to the desire on the part of Hindustani women to be independent, or to be in loving relationships with men, not to be under the foot of men, like they perhaps had been. This is evident for instance in oral histories that women tell, oral histories that their grandmothers or great-grandmothers have told them. I think that is such a fertile ground to go looking into further. This again is about their cultural archive that is very specific that also has to do with the history that they had in Suriname, how they had to do labour in the fields and so on and so forth. And when I’m looking now to those people that I know who are in relationships with women of other groups, I see some mixed relationships between Creole and Hindustani women, and I think that that would be a very fertile ground to explore. Also Creole and Javanese female same-sex relationships. There are also other sexual areas that deserve more attention, when you are going to adopt that horizontal approach—the phenomenon of the outside woman and homosocial cultures, for example. In Suriname, masculinity hasn’t been studied at all, nor have bisexuality and male same-sex relationships.

Besides the way in which *Politics* provides a foundation for thinking about sexual cultures of the Caribbean, it also lays out a number of challenges and provocations to an emerging global gay culture, and transnational advocacy for sexual rights.

GW: I think I've just begun to scratch the surface really. I focused more closely on how women themselves construct their sexuality, how that goes way back, what kind of principles they use to give form to their sexuality and how there is a diasporic flavour to the way that those sexualities are put together. But I certainly think that there is a lot more work to be done, and I am also wondering whether these notions of global queerness are really going to help us to do that work. What I have seen so far of that work is that it tends to homogenize much too much. I find that whatever we find in all these different local environments on the ground is very carefully put together and a very dynamic configuration of global and local phenomena. In Suriname people may talk about themselves as gay or lesbian, but there is a very thick influence of the local repertoire in which people have been thought to think about same-sex behaviour. I didn't write about that in *Politics*, but in 2001 there was a Miss Gay contest in Suriname, with men competing for the title. What was really interesting was that during one round they had to present themselves as they would most like to see themselves, how they would like to present themselves to others. It was very striking that seven out of eleven contestants showed up wearing those elaborate skirts, you know, that Surinamese women wear—with headdresses, basins with fruits and shrubs on their head. I thought this was so amazing, you know, that even while they may be calling themselves gay, that the grammar in which they express it is totally local. For me to sanction this idea of there being only one-way traffic, one way of gay identity that is being transported, or exported, all over the world, just doesn't make sense at all.

You certainly see this complex dynamic—this “hybrid, messy, on-the-ground” phenomenon, as you put it (Wekker 255)—happening in many other places, especially so in the creolized space of the Caribbean. But there is at the same time often a rejection of the part of this negotiation that is not Euro-American. I am talking about the gay men and gay organizations that insist on mimicking a San Francisco model of gay identity and culture, of the young women you mention in *Politics* who claim the name lesbian and are derisive about Mati Work.

GW: I know exactly what you mean. But the thing that is also striking is that they are not the only ones who think that. They are repeating something on cue, from the cues that they get for instance from the Dutch State. The State also wants that kind of identification practice. If you pronounce that you are a lesbian, then maybe you will get a permit to stay in the Netherlands. The State is perplexed by anything outside of this; it asks “What is this Mati?” It instructs: *if you say, and fashion yourself after the dominant mode of being a lesbian, then that is something we recognize*, so there is a very strong force emanating from that. I find the workings of the State in ... sorting out people according to modernity and traditionalism even more detrimental than when these young girls are doing it, you know. We shouldn't endorse that either. Of course it's not something that I would want to endorse. I try to explain to them what is at stake in doing that, but I do find that when the State is doing it, it carries infinitely more consequences.

What we sometimes see, I also think, are gay and lesbian champions of sexual rights who are brave and revolutionary, but who are also working within—and not challenging—a teleological narrative, the “global imperialist script” as you put it (255).

GW: Absolutely. I’m really wanting to get people to think more about repeating such seemingly automatic binaries, like what they conceive of as tradition and modernity, which is so evident in so many things. Why is it that we are so willing to give up on this culture that has survived for many centuries and that has shown its resilience through so many difficulties and through many migrations, why are we so prepared to give up on it? And to embrace another way of being in the world, that for all I know, you know, also has its costs attached to it? I find that there are certain costs attached to embracing this identity.

But there are resources too. I don’t want to be this nostalgic old woman. But there’s a certain way in which I want to point out that the Mati Work has seen a lot of women through, it has seen a lot of men and women through, and has made it possible for them to survive and to form communities. We shouldn’t be too quick about tossing it overboard, really in terms of community. I think there’s a lot there.

Are the LGBT organizations from the global North, who are becoming increasingly interested in sexual struggles in the South, advancing a global imperialist script of sexuality? Among a great number of them—from Canada to Sweden to Holland—there seems to be a sense of “fait accompli”, that they have now finished the task of achieving sexual liberation, so now they must free gays and lesbians in the South too.

GW: I find it deeply, deeply problematical, and I should say that has not been one of my angles, in which I looked at Mati Work. But I can certainly say a thing or two generally about this issue, or organizing, or even when we talk of collaboration. I’m often struck by the unproblematic way in which Dutch people, Dutch NGOs, the Dutch State, engages with countries from the South as if it’s totally clear that they have left a colonial or neo-colonial mode behind them. It is not clear to me at all that that has happened, especially when you look at Dutch history. For example, when the Netherlands lost Indonesia—the “jewel” in the Dutch crown—the next day all those colonial officers became development collaborators. That was done by the State. Suddenly they were somebody else, they weren’t the colonial power anymore but—from one day to the next—they supposedly were on an even cue with the people in the Third World, in the South. As well, there is that attitude so deeply ingrained in us that we are not racist—that race is not an issue in the Netherlands, it is everywhere else but it is not here. And because there is no self-reflection and hardly any impetus to look at who the South is, you find all these nasty and ugly things in the way that Dutch NGOs deal with the South, so there’s no problem at all to see them as agents who are not as far yet. There is what has been called a “rhetoric of the family”, vis-à-vis Third World organizations, whether you look at development or HIV/AIDS programming. It is oftentimes done in a mode of, “well we have figured this

out, how this works, and we're going to help you get to the place where we are at, because you don't have the resources to figure it out for yourself." And this is a strong attitude, which is also backed up by resources.

I'm very interested in a number of other phenomena, which sort of structure the relationship between the North and the South. In terms of the inegalitarianism of the resources that are available, I've come to understand that a lot of the sex lines in the Netherlands—the "09 lines", as they are called—offer an incredible array of sexual services that are being offered to people. All kinds of different kinds of sex: sex with young girls, with young boys, sex with fat ladies, with black men and women. There's incredible specialization on these 09 lines, and a lot of these telephone sex lines are being operated from the Dutch ex-colonies, they are being operated in Suriname and the Dutch Antilles. This is one of the new phenomena that I would really be interested in exploring further, because these people speak Dutch—Dutch is often their first language. But they get courses in speaking Dutch without a Surinamese or Antillean accent. By local standards, these phone sex workers make a lot of money, and for these operators it's of course much cheaper to have these people work from the Antilles and from Suriname. Here you see a new field where sex has settled itself, has inserted itself.

A second place where North and South interact is that a lot of connections are being set up between white gay men mostly in the Netherlands and in Belgium, and gay boys in Suriname and the Dutch Antilles. And, though I'm not saying that it's totally absent in a female to female sphere, but this is a very marked phenomenon in male same-sex relationships, so all kinds of inegalitarianisms that already exist are replicated in how Dutch NGOs and activist groups deal with groups in the South. It's disconcerting that these structures really remain in place even though they take on new forms. New forms but still the old inequalities raise their head.

Sexual desires are surely imbued with power—are no doubt informed by anxieties about race, sex, gender and class through and through—but how do we exercise a kind of non-punitive approach about the consensual kinds of sexual choices people make with a simultaneous critique of oppression and commitment to sexual and social justice?

GW: I think we should not be innocent about our relationships. We haven't been given the tools—maybe there hasn't been much impetus to develop those tools—but I think that the time is really ripe to develop those tools and to disseminate them so that people can stop being innocent about their personal relationships. I feel quite strongly about this. There are many different formats for having a personal relationship, and we happen in the West supposedly to be into egalitarianism along a number of dimensions: we are supposed to have the same background, same level of education, same income and class and so on. All of those things appear to be very important, but I'm also convinced that there is an undercurrent which has a lot to do with our cultural archive that I spoke about earlier. It speaks of unconscious or barely conscious desires which are also very present and which shape us and our desires, which shape who we feel attracted to. It is not enough anymore to be totally flabbergasted by those desires, that they overtake you and

you can't do anything about it. We can't simply accept that "it's just there" and not consider, for example, desires by white men for only young Surinamese boys. Let's not be so innocent about that and let's try to discover what is behind those desires. Let's recognize that they are not individual desires but patterns that are cultured. It's what our culture, 400 years of it, has prepared us to feel. Instead of being so politically correct about our desires and to say that our desires are all clean and not messy, we must acknowledge that they are pretty messy and that we need to delve deeper and historicize those desires. That is what I would like to do in the next project. I think that that is reconcilable still with wanting to have a society, in which there is social egalitarianism and recognizing that desire doesn't work in such a simple way. It sounds a bit cliché maybe but I do not want it to be the case that blackness remains so firmly tied up with sexuality in the minds of many people of the dominant group without them having to think about it and to become aware of that.

My last question is about your own desires: what did you learn about *love* from your experience of Mati Work, and your relationship with Juliette?

I am so humbled by that encounter. Juliette and I came from such different worlds but apparently we found each other and a middle ground in which we really met, in which we really saw each other. It's the least likely of things to happen and yet it happened, and so when you ask me "do you believe in love, and how do you see love?" [laughing], I might at this point already say, "This is love!" You encounter it in the least likely of places when you allow yourself to be open to it and it comes with many different faces and many different disguises, but when you do allow yourself that exchange of feelings and that meeting of spirits, that is what it is. I believe strongly in that, that way of seeing people as Juliette explained to me. She often said she saw me being carried by Amerindian spirits, spirits that love gregariousness, love people around them. She said that I was being carried by those spirits, and that she felt attracted to that because she also had those spirits. I think it's such a lovely way to look upon people which is so much richer, allows so much more, than if we think "ok, so I'm meeting this person, what kind of education has this person had, what is her income?", you know, stuff like that. I'm very happy that I have encountered a different way of looking at loving and being loved.

I learned that I fall in love when this person has a lot of knowledge. That knowledge is not necessarily academic knowledge. That clearly was the case with Juliette, she was sitting on a tonne of knowledge, carried around so much knowledge about different things in her head; I found it absolutely mesmerizing. I have written about how that relationship at times seemed like a therapeutic relationship because I was learning things about myself that I had not heard before. I also learned about that there can be a large age difference between partners, and I thought that was also so fascinating. Juliette showed me a whole new way of thinking about the sexuality of older people, who we often insist should be asexual: *They've had their time, eh?* That is such a punitive attitude, to equate sex with youth and being attractive in a particular way, having a good tight body. I think the Mati Work does away with all of that. A lot of the ideas that we have around love in the West are in a sense so commercialized and so pre-packaged about what is attractive and what is the time in your life that you can lay claim to having this attractiveness, it's

very reductive really. It opened up a lot for me to be part of the Mati Work, to become part of the Mati Work.

When you ask, “what does love mean to you”, I think of Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet*, which offers precisely the understanding of love I experienced in my relationship with Juliette and in those relationships which have felt good, liberating, not incarcerating me. When the prophet is being asked to talk about marriage, he says:

*Love one another, but make not a bond of love.
Let it rather be a moving sea between
the shores of your souls.*

*Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.
Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.*

*Sing and dance together and be joyous,
but let each of you be alone,*

*Even as the strings of a lute are alone
though they quiver with the same music.*

*Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping.
For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.*

*And stand together, yet not too near together.
For the pillars of the temple stand apart,*

*And the oak tree and the cypress
grow not in each other's shadow.*

That’s what I believe about love, and that’s also what I think that the Mati Work has made me see clearer. It’s much less of holding each other, so that you kind of strangle each other, but like you are standing tall like this. I love this phrase about oak and cypress do not grow in each others’ shadow. So you stand on your own and you are deeply different from the loved one, but you give each other stuff, you give each other something or maybe you walk a while in the same direction, but you are your own person.

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