

Gloria

By Ernst Coppenjans



71 years

'My drive and desire for autonomy stem from being a lesbian'

1950 Paramaribo, Suriname / scientist

'I didn't always know. First, I had relationships with men. I was with a woman for the first time when I was 28. That was a revelation. I'm not, so to speak, a diehard dyke. Later in my life I also had a relationship with a man. For me, sexuality is not like: that's just how you are. I can actually go either way. But I find it more fun and more exciting to be with a woman. It feels more intimate and it empowers me.'

Family acceptance

'When I introduced a girlfriend to my father, he struggled. My mother had already died by then. He was very proud of me. After graduating, I landed a job at the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. He spoke to his friends about what I had achieved from a social point of view. But he didn't talk about my personal life. I didn't think that was acceptable, that he chose only what he liked about me, and not the whole package. I said: you are proud of me for what I have achieved, but what I do is only possible because I am a lesbian. That is where the drive to be autonomous and the urge to follow my own path originate. He took that conversation to heart. My brothers and sisters were also a bit uncomfortable in the beginning, but they have accepted it.'

Maggie, my great love

'In 1990 I met my great love Maggie in Suriname. She was a nurse and worked in Suriname for 16 years. Under very simple conditions. I found that interesting and cool, I like cool. We've been together for 28 years. Her sudden traumatic death is mitigated by the fact that I am very aware of how happy we were. I've been so lucky with her. In April 2018 she died of a tumour in her heart. But she is still very much present.'

Research into mati

'In Paramaribo it was not problem at all that we were together. I did research there and wrote a book about mati. Mati refers to both men and women, who have intimate and sexual relationships with people of both sexes. I don't call it bisexual, because it has very different cultural and historical roots. They are 'matis', 'friends' with benefits. The mati women form a subculture in Suriname. It is mainly Creole working-class women who often have children with a man and at the same time have a fondness for women. Their sexual relations are not seen as part of their identity, but as part of their behaviour. It's an activity. It is a very old phenomenon that already existed during slavery. I think it is an important institution that people have brought with them from Africa which they continued and built up in Suriname. It occurs in many parts of the black diaspora. Maggie and I hung out in mati and lesbian circles. It was the best period of my life.'

Racism in the women's movement

'In the 1970s, with a South African friend, I founded Sister Outsider, a group of black lesbians. We had separated from the white women's movement and the white lesbian movement because of the prevalence of racism. In history, as it is documented, you will find very little black activism. I find it so crippling when I watch documentaries or read studies about the seventies and eighties, that they only deal with the white women's movement and the white lesbian movement. We were present too. Only recently has that started to change, now that younger people are writing about it.'

Relationships with others

'Maggie and I have had a rich life. Our relationship was a safe haven from where we could explore relationships with others. I was more at the forefront in this respect than she was, but she did this too. It was an enrichment of our existence. I've never been in favour of 'gay marriage', I find that pledging your undying allegiance to one person is so implausible and so crippling really. Some relationships were shorter, others longer. Most of those people still play a role in my life. I really want to advocate for an existence as a gay or lesbian that is not a goodie-two-shoes, boring lifestyle.'