

"We Deh": Women-Loving Women, Rurality, and Creole Linguistic Potentials

Preity Kumar

<https://doi.org/10.51897/interalia/ZOUD5747>

abstract

This paper draws on ethnographic interviews with women-loving women (WLW) in Berbice, Guyana, South America, to interrogate the Creole linguistic term "deh" as a cultural heuristic device central to the visibility politics in this rural community. The linguistic concept of "deh" is a localized Creole (a dialect produced from the mixing of African, Indian, and Indigenous languages), which unsettles the Western image of the "closet" and the discourse of "coming out." "Deh" is a double-entendre referring to a spatial location, like "over there," and to a romantic or sexual relationship between two people. How might the linguistic concept of "deh" open up a discursive epistemological space where same-sex desires are not marginalized or relegated in rural spaces? How do women loving women (WLW) create the conditions for their existence in rural spaces? Analyzing nine interviews with WLW, this paper explores how Black and Brown women-loving women embody and express their same-sex desires through the Creole concept of "deh" and argues that "deh" exposes the colonial violence of language. Through "deh," WLW offers a framework for rethinking self-making and repositioning their relationship to the broader society and the state. The colonial/modern system imposes and projects LGBTQ as a global framework for understanding human sexuality; as a transgressive linguistic and embodied sexual praxis, "deh" destabilizes the colonial knowledge of gender and sexual practices in Berbice. As such, this paper can be read as an act of decolonizing Western knowledge systems.

keywords

Guyana, LGBTQ, Women Loving Women, Rural, Creole, Coloniality

Introduction

From the Atlantic Coast, south into the deepest reaches of Guyana's interior, sandwiched between the Berbice River on the west and the Corentyne River on the east, Berbice (region 6)¹ is located within Guyana's rural countryside. The colonial history marks the landscape with its large plantations and undeveloped land. Thus region is dotted by villages, whose architectural designs tell a story of the region's racial groups and socioeconomic status. Homes built predominantly by the locally sourced greenheart tree or massive slabs of concrete—nestled within the tropical landscape or elevated by stilts to prevent flooding—dominate the landscape. The contrast between the well-kept homes with tidy lawns and those with peeling paint, dilapidated windows, and overgrown weeds points to the differences in social class among the local population of Indo and

Afro-Guyanese. The region is predominantly Indo-Guyanese, including some who were able to "break away from the plantation entrapment and become land and rice mill owners, shopkeepers, and [formed] close association with the western-controlled banking system" (Roopnarine, 2017). Yet poverty persists as the region continues to rely on sugar and rice.

This paper situates itself within this context of rural Berbice, examining how working-class rural women used the linguistic term "deh" to name, mark, and symbolically reference their relationships with women. Within the interviews I conducted for this study, six working-class women in rural Berbice used the concept of "deh." These six interlocutors are part of the "informal" work sectors that include occupations such as domestic help, market vendors, and service industries, with little to no formal education, speaking what Walter Edwards refers to as "rural Creole" (1990: 99). Commonly referred to as Berbicians, most Indo and Afro-Guyanese are fluent in English. However, Creole English—a mixture of Dutch, West African, Indigenous, and British English—developed from plantation colonies—is the local language spoken in rural Berbice (Parkvall and Jacobs, 2023).² Edwards distinguishes between "rural Creole" and "urban Creole" to explain a continuum of speech in Guyana, noting how rural Creole morphemes are "rarely uttered by [the capital city] Georgetown (urban) residents and are alluded to disparagingly by Georgetowners when they wish to characterise the speech of the uneducated rural people" (Edwards, 1990: 101). The differences between rural Berbice and the capital city of Georgetown can be subtle but are discernible by those familiar with the nuances of the language. Vocabulary, intonation, idiomatic expressions, and speech patterns each vary between the regions. While Edwards points to the geographical differences in spoken Creole, class and social status structures further mediate how Creole is spoken and expressed.

Within the rural context, Creole is culturally stigmatised, seen as the peasantry, working-class language, and referred to as "broken English." However, "brokenness" carries multiple signifiers: an "improper" diluted and contaminated dialect of Dutch and British vocabulary, spoken predominantly by rural communities of lower socioeconomic and educational status. Speakers of rural Creole are seen as lacking respectability from elite groups, as one participant reminded me after hearing my accent: "Oh, yuh from the country." Speaking "broken" English is a mnemonic reminder of the colonial past—a colonial past that is yet to be fully studied or understood in the collective psyche of Guyana. Although Creole emerged from the conditions of colonialism and can be thought of as a language of survival—adaptation, merging, and blending—forming new kinship and communal structures, the failure to "properly" belong is symptomatic of the post-colonial subject. The brokenness of language is not simply a lexical and

grammatical fracture but represents the privileging of English as the only medium of communication in modernity and the power imbalance between the global West and the “other.” Adaption and declaration of English as Guyana's “official” language are how “post-colonial” elites and structures uphold and reinforce coloniality. Using “deh” as a term of analysis challenges the coloniality in language, classism/elitism, and global/western sexual politics rooted in

cosmopolitan identity practice discourses. The term “deh” transcends geographical boundaries, as it is not exclusive to Guyana or the Caribbean: it can also be found in various Pidgin languages spoken in regions across Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and several other West African nations (Gharib, 2018; Ihemere, 2006). The transnational significance of the term emphasises how language was retained, assimilated, and adopted by both enslaved people and later Indian indentured groups in Guyana.

“Deh” exposes how working-class queer women enact a sexual praxis based, similar to *mati-work* (Wekker, 2006) *zami*, (Lorde, 1982), or *friending* practices (Ghisyan, 2016) in rural Berbice. This paper argues that “deh” is a linguistic epistemology shift that interrupts Western LGBTQ frameworks of how gender and sexual identities are embodied and lived. The Guyanese Creole concept of “deh” moves beyond the LGBTQ classification and instead forces us to reconceptualise how sexuality and desire are experienced as an affectual embodiment or linguistically expressed and materialised. This linguistic shift represents a decolonial move, as it makes visible colonial naming practices and conceptions of “gender” and “sexuality” to better disrupt them.

Coloniality, Language, and Power

In “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “If you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language...I am my language. Until I take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (1987: 59). As Anzaldúa points out, the devaluation of Chicano Spanish and working-class slang English is to engage in psychological subjugation and weakening of one's sense of self. Under colonial conditions, Nelson Maldonado-Torres notes that the impact of colonialism resides not only in the realms of “authority, sexuality, knowledge, and the economy but on the general understanding of *being* as well” (2007: 242, emphasis mine). The “coloniality of Being” in Maldonado-Torres' words illustrates not merely the physical, sexual, and economic subjugation of the colonised but further how Western discourses have capitalised on the meaning of “Being” through philosophical epistemological and ontological discourses from the 17th-20th centuries — while neglecting the central role of colonialism in their conceptualisation of “Being.” The omission of colonised people's lived

experiences consolidated and imposed a universal Eurocentric understanding of “Being as Human.” The characteristics of humanity through Western Eurocentric standards have consistently excluded colonised people. Erasing any history—oral, written, spoken—cultural, religious, spiritual, and linguistic practices were suppressed by colonial rule. Franz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* (1986) illustrates the colonial value system's inscription into the colonised people's psyche. Dispositions towards the French language, customs, ideologies, and behaviours exemplify the pervasive internalisation of coloniality in the psyche of colonized communities (Jean-Marie, 2017: 194). The pressure to speak the “white man's language” allows colonised subjects to ascend the social, racial, and class hierarchies and achieve some proximity to “being a real human being” (Fanon, 1986: 18). However, Fanon notes that such an achievement produces failures of black subjectivity, as it requires self-alienation. He writes:

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. (1986: 18)

Coloniality continues through the usage of the English language, although colonialism has ended. Language preserves colonial structures as a tool of control and domination as it is the medium through which colonial ideas, belief systems, and ideologies were implemented throughout colonial societies. Making Indigenous languages illegal, forbidden, and marked as “uncivilised” has led to the loss of many languages, histories, and cultures. In *Decolonising Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes:

Berlin of 1844 was affected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. (1986: 9)

While many of us can understand the physical, sexual, and economic violence of colonialism, it is much more difficult to pierce the veil of psychology and reveal the psychic harm of colonialism. Coloniality, as operationalised in the classroom, stripped people of their languages and their capacity to communicate—read, write, and speak—in their tongue. The linguistic erasure imposed through the “modern/colonial” gender system is one of the systematic ways in which colonialism thrived (Lugones, 2010). Explorations into language and embodiment persist as a focal point for understanding how marginalised individuals navigate the established colonial framework of knowledge creation and challenge them. The utilisation of the Creole term “deh” provides a linguistic avenue to investigate how WLW in rural Berbice envisions a collective realm of

queerness—a way of being—that does not necessarily align with conventional gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identities.

“Deh”: Chronicling Gender, Sexuality and Occupation Roles in Berbice

In what tongues do we not speak? In what languages do we express ourselves? How does language fail to capture our lived experiences? In discussing my project with a friend, he interjected and said he knew of a woman who “deh” with another woman. The word “deh” is a Creole term used to refer to “there,” as in “over there” or “she deh with him,” as in she is having a romantic or sexual relationship with another person. Second, he elaborated on her work ethic as a woman “who wuk pon truck, [someone who works with truckers] build houses with dem guys, [build homes] and ah drink with dem in the rum shop [drinks with men in the local bar].” Within this conversation, the term “deh” serves as an illustrative tool showcasing the community’s comprehension of this woman’s gender, sexual, and vocational distinctions. Her involvement in occupational roles and interactions with men in the village rum shop—domains traditionally considered outside the purview of women—demonstrate how working-class women partake in what Muñoz (1999) has termed “disidentification” with the predominant societal sphere.

Emily Kazyak asserts that “female masculinity is not necessarily stigmatised, presenting an account of which women’s engagement with practices and discourses associated with masculinity is seen as normative and which are seen as disruptive” (2012: 829). Rural women’s engagement of masculinity and femininity is contingent on their occupational roles and how these jobs are perceived as a normal part of the country or rural living. Jobs such as physical laboring, farming, and construction work, although seen as “masculine,” serves to “bolster their [rural queers] acceptances in small towns” (Kazyak, 2012: 831). Such movement through masculinity and femininity is not antithetical to the gender binary.

Language is not simply a vernacular; it is an ideology that helps us orient and ground ourselves in a particular space and context. Through linguistic performances, WLW establishes alternative worlds, despite the seemingly overwhelming structures of oppression and violence. Approaching rural Berbice through modern-day English grammar recenters colonial violence, or what Phillipson calls “linguistic imperialism” (1992). This violence threatens to erase the complex histories of indigeneity, slavery, and indentureship that have produced a tongue, a dialect, and a space for communicating a reality borne through colonialism. In Guyana and the broader Caribbean region, the emerging

field of Caribbean Queer and Transgender Studies is witnessing a rich production of literary productions. These works challenge and provoke our thinking about "queerness" in the region's history and contemporary moment. Krystal Ghisyawan writes that the first usage of queer "refer[ed] to how colonized laboring subjects were perceived as falling short of societal norms of respectability" (161: 2015). This initial usage of queer marked, named, and categorised sexual practices, kinship relations, and interracial relationships as deviances that did not fit into the blueprint of European relationships and intimacy (Bahadur, 2016; Cummings, 2010; Tinsley, 2010). The imposition of "queer" on colonised subjects was not a simple matter of mis-categorizing or misnaming. Rather, imposing "queer" upon a group refuses their humanity through the makings of "difference." Rosamund King asserts that black and brown women's sexualities were intrinsically viewed as "queer" as in "odd, deviant and less moral" by European (and often by colored) elites" (p. 193 cited in Ghisyawan, 2015: 162). King (2014) also notes that the Creolized vernacular includes "zami"—used as either a verb or a noun—to refer to the intimacy between women, "man royal" to refer to women loving women in Jamaica, and *Jamettes*³ in Trinidad, and others such as "kambrada, ma divine, and cachapera" (101). While the region was contrived through queerness in the colonial period, "third world" women such as Anzaldúa remind us that the Western world does "not know us, they do not bother to learn our languages, the language which reflects us, our culture, our spirit" (163). The delegitimation of one's language is part of the colonial process, in which one is dehumanised. Through the degradation of language, one's identity is eroded.

The region's linguistic diversity means we speak inaudible languages and untranslatable tongues unrecognised by the Western gaze. Audre Lorde describes the practices of "madvine, friending, and zami" to refer to how women come to love each other, despite the absence and returning of their men from the sea (1982: 14). Zami is a Carriacou name for women who worked, lived, and raised children together as friends and lovers, but whose relations were forged under colonial conditions. These conditions make the Caribbean a space and a site of analysis different from the global north. Tinsley (2010) draws attention to a range of gender and sexual formations, identities, and practices indigenous to Creole societies, which existed prior to the rise of queerness in the North American context (242). In these works, while there is a clear connection between working-class women and the naming of sexual practices through the categories mentioned above, the degree to which these naming practices evolved out of rural or urban contexts is unclear. The trend towards associating queerness with urban space in the global north is less applicable in Caribbean nations (Murray, 2012; Puar, 2009; Tinsley, 2010). The complex interplay between diverse and mixed populations, urban and rural settlements of the islands, and the social, political,

racial, and economic stratification, makes it difficult to pinpoint how geographical differences have shaped Creole naming conventions regarding same-sex practices and desires in the region. Plantation economies and small colonial administrations gave rise to present-day urban centres in the region, where the geographical boundaries between rural, suburban, and urban are blurry. For instance, in the 1990s, Gloria Wekker's fieldwork focused on the sexual subjectivity of working-class Afro-Surinamese women in the capital city of Paramaribo, Suriname. Using West African cosmology and grammar, "Matiwork" is the Sranan Tongo for women who have sexual relations with other women (Wekker, 1993; 2006). More broadly, Mati refers to the complex social, political, and sexual arrangements where working-class women engage in relationships with men and women and bear children consecutively, simultaneously, or independently. Matiwork – or the "doing" of sexuality – invites us to reimagine how women build emotional, economic, political, and social arrangements unattached to categories of LGBTQ, as urban cosmopolitan queers have come to understand contemporary sexual and asexual practices. However, Paramaribo is a dense city with complex neighbourhoods of wealth and poverty, making the city's boundaries between the upper and lower classes somewhat illusory. Sexual practices and praxes remain exclusively produced within urban and suburban spaces of the Caribbean Island, although geographically unmarked.

"We Deh": An Embodied Sexual and Linguistic Praxis

Across racial differences, working-class women in rural Berbice enter into and experience "queerness" through praxis-based Creole descriptors. I argue that deh is an embodied sexual praxis and a transgressive linguistic practice carrying several iterations, as outlined below:

1. Deh (noun)- refers to there, as in a place, location, or over there. For instance, the soap is over deh/there.
2. Deh (verb)- She deh with him, as she is with him, or to be with someone.
3. Deh (adverb)- To mark a point in the speech or action. For example, she paused deh: as in she paused there or midway in her conversation or speech.
4. Used to call attention to a particular matter, place, or issue. For example, wah goin on deh, as in: what is going on there?
5. Make a point/state/condition as in right deh/right there. For instance, she right fuh get mad deh, as in: she has a right to be angry regarding that matter.

Jasmine, a short, medium-built Indo-Guyanese woman in her 40s, met me at a local rum shop in one of the villages. I ordered two beers, and as we cooled off from the heat, Jasmine told me about her family, work, and current partner. Previously married to a man with whom she had one child, Jasmine now lives with her partner in rural Berbice. Jasmine explained how she always:

like woman, but meh frighten telling them [parents] because rememba we ah Muslin, religion-wise, yuh livin at home, then yuh gah worry bout yuh fatha, yuh get licks, so I guh wait. Meh, build me own house, and meh deh by me now. I get meh own place and everything. Ah, doin' everything now. Meh, house ga everything, we make do with wah we get.

Deh, in this narrative, evokes and reveals several signifiers of belonging as experienced and expressed in rural villages. Deh is the spatial location of Jasmine's home, where she was unable to engage in her same-sex attraction and desire for women and so intentionally chose to "wait" until she was financially stable and older. Buying a plot of land and building a home is no small accomplishment. Access to a private home space is a privilege and an iteration of how queer world-making occurs in rural spaces through the negotiations between family, religion, and access to resources. Having access to the private space of her home, Jasmine can "do everything now."⁴ Through the Creole concept of "deh," Jasmine claims space and belonging within a space and time beyond the confines of LGBTQ discourses "deh" serves as a contrast to "out and proud" or visibility narratives, which require decisive personal statements. Jasmine's choice to "deh" as in stay, remain put, or simply illustrates how queerness is congruent to rurality, playing out not through her "coming out" but through the articulation of "deh." Deh performs another function as a state of integration, being, and existing within the local village:

Meh, neva deh in any prablem with adda people. Meh, like how now meh livin' home with meh gyal. They [referring to neighbours] don't show meh none bad face 'cause we gaff narmal and be narmal. Me and meh girl ah deh around them and gaff narmal. Them nah say nothing because even to the neighborhood when we come out if them see we, we narmal, yuh?

Jasmine describes how she has never experienced problems and how she and her partner "deh," as in existing or being around the neighbours, and have friendly relations with neighbours. Discussing her relationship with her external community, "deh" illustrates the social and cultural interactions and dynamics for queer bodies in rural villages. Given the absence of local spaces dedicated to queer life, the semi-public/private "bottom house"—the space underneath the stilts of the home—is used for socialising and other daily activities essential for social life. Outside or inside the "bottom house" are spaces where individuals and groups gather, converse or "gaff," gossip, resolve conflicts, and get to know each other intimately. Thus, despite awareness of sexual differences, these

communal structures and interactions are essential to organising rural life. In rural spaces, particularly because of geographical proximity, communities are formed through intergenerational family structures, parental care, managing the family's business, and carrying the family name. In all these ways, they serve as an alternative to queer city life in Guyana. In exploring rural queerness in Nova Scotia, Kelly Baker illustrated how community involvement via work, attending community events like town halls, and communal dependency are necessary for community acceptance and integration of queer people (2012: 12). Although one might be of a working-class status, the social values of respectability, responsibility to the family unit, and land are ways in which class status is fragmented, where inclusion and exclusion in the community are murky. These contradictory features of rural life are typically (re)negotiated daily.

This does not suggest that same-sex activity is unimportant or ignored, but rather that "differences" are absorbed as part of a person's collective self. In this sense, sexual practices are intimate, public, and private. The communal acceptance of Jasmine and her partner is made possible through their relationality with their community. To "deh" with someone reveals how women loving women engage in "queer-world making" (Munoz, 1999: 195). World-making means operating outside of identity categories, where social relations of how one interacts with their community and attends to their immediate and extended family is given prominence. Within this context, "deh" speaks to one's social position, engagement, and behaviours with others, where queerness is rewritten through everyday life's bodily and community practices. The concept of world-making allows us to glimpse how queerness manifests, transforms, and extends beyond sexual identities.

Describing her relationship with her partner, Jasmine paints a picture of how queer life is embodied daily: "She does deh with meh, whatevea we eat, we eat togetha, we wuk enough money, she does deh with meh fuh sell." While particular importance is placed on the heterosexual nuclear family, homophobia, and discrimination of LGBTQ people—an overrepresented discourse of rural life—the linguistic "deh" (verb) reveals how queer subjectivity is structured through the *habitual action* of resource sharing, eating, and working together. The trope of "doing everything together" is explored in various Afro-diasporic settings, appearing to extend across national boundaries (Dankwa, 2021; Mohammed, Nagarajan and Aliyu, 2018; Tinsley, 2010). For instance, within same-sex women relationships in Ghana, Dankwa (2021) observes that the phrase "doing everything together" functions as a euphemistic expression employed by women to connote various aspects of their relationships, encompassing both sexual and non-sexual dimensions. These dimensions involve activities such as cooking, food-sharing, collaborative work, and other shared tasks on a daily basis. It

signifies not only the sexual and romantic features of one's life but the bridging of the economic, intimate, and sexual, or what Jacqui Alexander calls the "spirit knowing" a "mechanism for making the world intelligible" (2006: 15). Carly Thomsen's work with LGBTQ women in rural South Dakota and Minnesota reveals how women are neither "closeted nor not out" (2021: 48). Thomsen's noted that her interlocutors neither see their sexualities as "political—but also none of them can accurately be described as "closeted" or "not out" (2021: 53). Communal structures, hobbies, political, and social affiliations are more desirable ways of being "visible" in one's rural community than engaging in a politics based on sexual identity. Thomsen's work illustrates the contradicting and overlapping relationship being "coming out," "being out," and "visibility" that women can be out, without having to come out (2021: 35-36). What is noteworthy is that Jasmine did not discuss any experiences of marginalisation, isolation, or fear of living in the rural.

However, she describes Georgetown as a place of affluence and a fast-paced lifestyle:

"rememba I own meh place here. Going there yuh ga rent a place and yuh ga mix. Yuh ga get a really good foundation fuh *deh*. When it come financial wise, I can't do it, yuh know yuh ga live the celebrity life because yuh know *deh* hot up, hot up." (emphasis PK)

In this context, the term "deh" acquires a spatial dimension akin to the notion of "over there" and is associated with specific social class connotations. As a property owner, Jasmine highlights that transitioning into an urban setting implies a financial reset for her. This move to the city would necessitate a solid economic base or resources to reestablish herself. Kazyak (2010) has demonstrated how geography (urban spaces) is constituted through class meanings as well, i.e., associated with "high-class people, mentalities, or actions" (111). In Jasmine's perspective, Georgetown is defined by a specific association with a "celebrity life" or describing individuals as "hot up." Two distinct ideas seem to be in operation here: first, Jasmine perceives the city as a space where she must be more conspicuous in the public sphere. Second, she envisions the city as a "mix" space, characterised by racial and ethnic diversity, necessitating interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds. These perceptions are crucial in Jasmine's visualisation of the urban space, demarcating it as a locus distinct from Berbice.

Navigating “Deh”: Gender norms and Respectability in Berbice

Tara (Afro-Guyanese, 20s) expressed similar sentiments when describing her relationship with her partner: “We deh togetha. We don't mix much, we like deh by weself, so if we not at my place, we at hers, and if we go out, we go out and get some ice cream or something. We like Spready's,⁵ Demico's house,⁶ etc.” While Tara expressed that she does not interact much with her community, and mostly she and her partner keep to themselves, she does express a certain degree of freedom and socialisation within her community. The lack of close communication with neighbours could be a common symptom for some young adults. However, this navigation in the public space is contingent upon appropriate gender expression:

“I talk to dis girl and, she into me, but she don't want people to see me and her togetha because once they see me they done know, how I dress, they gonna done think, they dehLike we deh. For instance, if you could change up your dressing, they gonna think they is best friends and ting like that.”

Gender presentations in rural spaces are essential to perceptions of sexuality, as it is often conflated with non-normative sexual practices. However, working male-dominated jobs and wearing “masculine” clothing are not uncommon practices in rural spaces. Rather, straight and lesbians often engage in farming work and are associated with rural masculinity (Kayzack, 2012). In the Midwest of the U.S., rural women embodying “female masculinity” are not consistently stigmatised. Rather, their existence sheds light on how acceptability is premised on gender presentations among rural women (Halberstam, 2018; Kazyak, 2012: 827; Noble, 2004). However, in Berbice, Tara’s gendered expressions also convey underlying sexual assumptions. Tara describes how through her gender performance of masculinity, the community will assume that she “deh” with another woman, regardless of whether that is true. Not donning conventional feminine clothing is one way the community perceives non-normative sexuality. The performance of masculinity through gender expressions and clothing styles “underpins both the categories of rural and lesbian, which may afford some lesbians the ability to stay in rural places” (Kazyak, 2012: 26). In other words, female masculinity, although subordinate to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), is more compatible with rurality, where it is acceptable for women to perform or “do” masculinity. Tara also indicates that while the community might aware of her queerness, she indicates that people are primarily concerned with:

"It is mostly they might wanna know what the person do for a living, whose disown you, if you gonna' *deh* good with the person, you know things like that will mostly matta to them most." (emphasis PK)

Although gender performances might articulate non-normative sexual practices and behaviours or suggest someone "deh" with another person, family and kinship structures are equally important than one's sexual practices and identities, if not more so. The family's reputation, income levels, how one is cared for within the family, and how one interacts with the extended community are all factors that shape the community's understanding of gender and sexual transgressions. As noted by Tara, "if yuh gonna deh good with the person." The reliance on sexual identities eclipses how women navigate the delicate line between gender, sexual, and communal structures.

Amanda (mixed-race, 30s) is a mother of three kids, "deh" with her partner. While people might suspect she is dating a woman, Amanda explains: "It is how yuh carry yuhself. If we walkin' in public, me and her won't hold hands and stuff like da, and we act like we livin' separate lives in public. It is not like we are into each other or anything." The idiom "how yuh carry yuhself" describes respectability politics in Berbice. Respectability politics links the quality of life, such as social status, socioeconomic position, gender, racial, and sexual inequalities of a group, to their lack of assimilation into the "norms, manners, and morals of the dominant, white society..." (Forde, 2018: 50). The politics of respectability illustrates how despite structural disadvantages, performances of respectability hold significant cultural value in the Caribbean region (Forde, 2018; Kempadoo, 2020; Peake and Trotz, 1999; Reddock, 2005). "How yuh carry yuhself" describes how people present themselves publicly by adopting and performing acceptable gender, racial, and sexual roles. The phrase emphasises "proper" behaviours such as speech etiquette, mannerisms, dress code, and religiosity. Or, more generally, how one expresses themselves in public spaces. Through these practices, people in rural spaces perform respectability politics and upwardly access social status, despite structural inequalities. Even though Amanda's neighbours are aware of her same-sex relationship, she emphasises that social acceptance is contingent upon her behaviour and interactions in the public realm. To secure this acceptance, Amanda refrains from openly displaying affection for her partner or showcasing their relationship publicly. While adhering to respectability politics—"how yuh carry yourself"—might be restricting and police individuals into hegemonic norms, these practices are aligned with rural values that bolster family, kinship, and communal integration. As Tara suggests: "Yeah, you like girls, but you don't gotta halla lesbian self on the road." In other words, Tara is referring to Western Pride Parades in which participants engage in sexual

provocations and scandalous dancing; in rural Berbice, women should not display or flaunt their sexuality in public. Amanda elaborated:

“In our area, people look up to me, kinda respect me, how yuh *carry yourself* in the area. So, people won't say things, even though they might say things, they might not say it for me to hear anything.” (emphasis PK)

Nadia (Indo-Guyanese, 30s), when discussing her experiences of living in the city, laments that “in town everybody, if they see two girls walking around holding hands, them say yes, them two *deh*, even if they two girls nah *deh*, them go say dah, but here they would say nuttin.” Nadia points to a critical difference between urban and rural spaces. While rural areas might question one's sexuality, in rural Berbice communities might be less inclined to inquire into such a matter verbally. The paradox of queer visibility within urban Georgetown, as evidenced in my documentation, serves as a double-edged sword. The recent heightened visibility of the LGBTQ community in Georgetown has led to instances of violence and backlash against the community (Kumar, 2019). The emphasis on family and community interactions underscores the importance of space in the embodiment and construction of gender and sexual practices within rurality. In this analysis, I have offered a Creole linguistic term to delve into an epistemological transformation within language, illustrating how queerness is embodied, how it interacts with other social modalities, and how it is actively practised.

The concept is also linked to alternative signification. The term “*deh*” conveys connotations of disrespectability, immorality, and promiscuous conduct. While to some extent tolerated, it lacks social approval and prevalence. For instance, the phrase “she *deh* with him” implies engaging in an extramarital affair. The spoken expression indicates a sense of secrecy and shame and communicates a sense of temporariness. It is possible that women-loving women's relationships are accepted, to some extent, because working-class bodies and relationships inherently bear a level of stigma and are perceived as non-threatening to the prevailing norms of heterosexuality. The term “*deh*” functions as a linguistic tool for understanding how women-loving women navigate community or kinship structures and how they experience acceptance and integration within rural communities in Berbice.

Conclusion: “Deh” As A Decolonial Option

Using the Creole concept of “*deh*” opens up a discursive space and offers insights into how queerness, gender, sexuality, and space are embodied and lived daily. Resisting colonial Western discourses that situate sexuality and identity as central to articulations of modernity, this article illustrates how “*deh*” as an

embodied and linguistic analytic reveals how women loving women are not excluded or outside of gender and sexual practices. Instead, gender and sexual relations are co-created and produced alongside other relations of non-consanguinity. “Deh” is one instantiation of how specific gender and sexual arrangements unfold within rural Berbice. Linguistic practices reproduced Eurocentric paradigms of sexuality, gender, and kinship structures and relegated non-Western expressions of same-sex desires and practices to follow Western identity categories and attain modernity. Yet, as this article shows, queerness need not follow Western teleological narratives of sexual progression, that WLW in rural spaces such as in Berbice lives complex and multifaceted lives. By turning to the Creole linguistic concept of “deh”—and the embodied lives of women loving women in rural Berbice—this paper interrogated the assumed notion that queer bodies in rural spaces are pushed to the margins of the social world. “Deh” disrupts implicit assumptions of queer invisibility in rural areas by showing women's experiences and articulating their queer desires beyond the narrow confinements of the colonial gender and sexual binaries and identities. Through language, this paper shows how queerness is made tenable in and through community, family, and kinship structures and how it binds people together. Using Eurocentric, urban, and suburban terms to discuss and analyse queerness in rural Berbice is an act of reterritorialisation: labelling and misidentifying how queerness is embodied and brought into a language (or refuses language). This paper contributes to the growing literature on Caribbean Queer and Transgender Studies by departing from analyses of queerness within urban spaces. A rural perspective instead shows how working-class women create and produce queer life in spite of oppressive power structures.

notes

1 A special thanks to Mariah Stember for her insightful feedback and guidance in drafting this paper. East Berbice-Corentyne (Region 6) is one of the ten regions in Guyana. It borders the Atlantic Ocean to the north, Brazil to the south, Suriname to the east, and other regions to the West. The region is known for its rice, cattle, and sugarcane commodities.

2 See Parkvall and Jacobs (2023) for a history and evolution of the Berbice Dutch Creole as it emerges from the mixing between Dutch (Creole) and Ijo speakers in Berbice.

3 The term “Jamette” is from the French word “diameter.” It is used to refer to black working-class women who were considered to be below the diameter of respectability, lacking social class, and morality in the 1800s.

4 See Chapter 5: “Doing Everything Together” in *Knowing Women: Same-Sex Intimacy, Gender, and Identity in Postcolonial Ghana* by Serena Owusua Dankwa (2021) for a discussion on how “doing everything together” is a metaphor for same-sex women in

Ghana. "Doing everything together" describes both sexual and non-sexual forms of closeness and relatedness outside of family blood relationships.

5 Spreadys Bakery and Snackette is a local bakery located in Corentyne, Berbice. It is a popular place for socializing.

6 Demico House is in Georgetown. It is a popular restaurant serving local Guyanese cuisine.

works cited

- Alexander, Jacqui (2006), *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria (1987), "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco, Aunt Lute Book Company: 53–64.
- Baker, Kelly (2012), "Taking New Directions: How Rural Queerness Provides Unique Insights into Place, Class, and Visibility," *Toten: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*, 2.1: 1–11
<http://doi.org/10.5206/uwoja.v20i1.8919>
- Connell, Raewyn and James W. Messerschmidt (2005), "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society*, 19.6: 829–859.
- Cummings, Ronald (2010), "(Trans)Nationalisms, Marronage, and Queer Caribbean Subjectivities," *Transforming Anthropology*, 18.2: 169–180,
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7466.2010.01094.x>
- Dankwa, Serena Owusua (2021), *Knowing Women: Same-Sex Intimacy, Gender, and Identity in Postcolonial Ghana*, African Identities: Past and Present, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863575>
- Edwards, Walter F. (1990), "Morphosyntactic Acculturation at the Rural/Urban Interface in Guyana," *American Speech*, 65. 2: 99–113.
- Fanon, Franz (1986), *Black Skin White Masks*, London, Pluto Press.
- Forde, Maarit (2018), "Respectable Families and the Body Politic," *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of Finnish Anthropological Society*, 43.4: 48–54, <https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.v43i4.83717>
- Gharib, Malaka (2018), "Why Prince Charles Said 'god don butta my bread!' in Nigeria," NPR,
<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/11/20/668604714/why-prince-charles-said-god-don-butta-my-bread-in-nigeria>
- Ghisyan, Krystal N. (2015), "Queer-(in) the Caribbean: The Trinidad Experience," *The Global Trajectories of Queerness: Re-thinking Same-Sex Politics in the Global South*, Ashley Tellis and Sruti Bala (eds), Leiden Boston, Brill Rodopi: 161–178.

- . (2016), "Social Erotics: The Fluidity of Love, Desire and Friendship for Same-Sex Loving Women in Trinidad," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17.3: 17-31.
- Halberstam, Jack (2018), *Female Masculinity*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Ihemere, Kelechukwu U (2006), "A Basic Description and Analytic Treatment of Noun Clauses in Nigerian Pidgin," *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 15.3, <https://doi.org/10.53228/njas.v15i3.29>
- Jean-Marie, Vivaldi (2017) "Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks," *The CLR James Journal*, 23.1/2: 193-210, <https://doi.org/10.5840/clrjames201711641>
- Kazyak, Emily A. (2010), "The Space and Place of Sexuality: How Rural Lesbians and Gays Narrate Identity," University of Michigan, PhD dissertation, https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/77837/ekazyak_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- . (2012), "Midwest or Lesbian? Gender, Rurality, and Sexuality," *Gender and Society*, 26.6: 825-848, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243212458361>
- Kempadoo, Kamala (2020), "Towards a Decolonization of Sexual Economic Praxis in the Caribbean," *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, 16.1, <https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/towards-a-decolonization-of-sexual-economic-praxis-in-the-caribbean/>
- Kumar, Preity (2019), "The Cauxin-Femme Binary: Femme Performativity as a Response to Violence in Guyana," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 25.2: 89-106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1689346>
- Lorde, Audre (1982), *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, New York, Crossing Press.
- Lugones, Maria (2010), "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia*, 25.4: 742-759.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson (2007), "On the Coloniality of Being," *Cultural Studies*, 21.1: 240-279, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548>
- Mohammed, Azeenarh, Nagarajan, Chitra and Rafeeat Aliyu (eds.) (2018), *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women speak*, Abuja, Cassava Republic Press.
- Muñoz, Jose Esteban (1999), *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Murray, David (2012), *Flaming Souls: Homosexuality, Homophobia and Social Change in Barbados*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Ngũgĩ, WA Thiong'o (1986), *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. *Studies in African Literature*, Oxford, James Currey Ltd.
- Noble, Jean Bobby (2004), *Masculinities without Men?: Female Masculinity in Twentieth-Century Fictions*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press.
- Omise'eke, Natasha Tinsley (2010), *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

- Parkvall, Mikael and Bart Jacobs (2023), "Returning a maverick creole to the fold: the Berbice Dutch enigma revisited," *Folia Linguistica*, 57. 1: 177-203, <https://doi.org/10.1515/flin-2022-2051>
- Peake, Linda and Alissa Trotz (1999), *Gender, Ethnicity and Place: Women and Identities in Guyana*, London, Routledge.
- Phillipson, Robert (1992), *Linguistic Imperialism*, London, Oxford University Press.
- Reddock, Rhoda (2005), "Rethinking Common-Law Unions: Toward a Critical Re-Evaluation of Caribbean Family Sociology," *Ideaz*, 4.102: 72-85.
- Roopnarine, Lomarsh (2017), "Class dynamics in rural Guyana," *Guyana Chronicle*, <https://guyanachronicle.com/2021/11/07/class-dynamics-in-rural-guyana/>
- Thomsen, Carly (2021), *Visibility Interrupted: Rural Queer Life and the Politics of Unbecoming*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Wekker, Gloria (1993), "Mati-ism and black lesbianism: Two idealtypical expressions of female homosexuality in black communities of the Diaspora," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 24.3-4. 145-58, https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v24n03_11
- . (2006), *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*, New York, Columbia University Press.