

# Beyond Intersectionality: Redefining Difference in the City

**Sophie Russell**

**University of Exeter**

## Abstract

Intersectionality has become a dominant framework within in the study of human geography, but it is not perfect. Whilst being a strong tool to analyse the relationships between different social categories, intersectionality theory is flawed in that it fails to appreciate the fluidity of social identities. Crucially, by neglecting the underlying foundations of space and geography, the intersectionality framework limits how geographers can situate social phenomena within a place. This article exposes limitations to the seeming inclusivity of intersectionality by contextualising the concept within urban spaces, through a particular focus on how the lived experience of 'the right to the city'. Through a close reading of black queer authors and their poetry about the city, this article concludes that a renewed focus on space might revitalise an intersectional approach, and suggest new possibilities for the study of human geography.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, right to the city, urban geography, literature, queer geography, feminist geography, identity

## Introduction

As theories about the city as a site of inclusion and exclusion have grown in scope, the basic idea of social difference has remained the same. As a site of super-diversity, the city is characterised by difference, but the actual concept of difference itself has largely been considered resolved. Much of contemporary understandings about cities of diversity stem from movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of intersectionality (Scott and Marshall, 2014), and to a lesser extent the right to the city (Harvey, 2017). A large portion of this criticism has been focused on cities within the United States, therefore, this paper will be considering intersectionality through American urban spaces and the literary texts written about them. These approaches have been crucial to understanding diversity; but I believe that failures to apply intersectionality to the city's ever-changing differences limits our capacity to understand how urban space works. By analysing beyond these conventional frameworks, I will examine how one specific axis of difference, race and sexuality, challenges geographers' comfortable assumptions about identity. This contestation is put into practice through the experiences of black queer people, elicited from a selection of their poetry, which emphasises how even the most progressive theories are no match to the city's own diversity.

## Background

Firstly, this paper outlines intersectionality as the framework developed from Kimberle Crenshaw's 1989 paper 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex' (Crenshaw, 1989). Defining difference is contested within geography; however, intersectionality appears to provide a way to contain that multiplicity within one unifying theory. Broadly, intersectionality is defined as an approach that considers identity to be multi-layered and mutually constructed, with different axes intersecting to reveal macro-level socio-structural inequalities (Bowleg, 2013; Scott and Marshall, 2014). This theory rose to

status quo with the notion that identity characteristics are layered and irreducible, and that aspects of difference cannot be simplified or exchanged. Within studies of the city, intersectionality has been a framework in representing the breadth of urban diversity, and a tool in understanding why some people experience inclusion and exclusion differently (Raco, 2018). Therefore, intersectionality is key for constructing the axes of difference we use to define urban diversity.

The second key framework for analysing difference is the right to the city. This approach appears in the background literature as a means of applying geographic theory to real life experience. The right to the city is defined as 'a transformed and renewed right to urban life' (Lefebvre, 1968). However, it has become a more popular approach within urban geography with the increasing recognition of difference and economic inequality in urban spaces. David Harvey succinctly explains that the right to the city is 'far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire' (Harvey, 2017). Essentially, the right to the city is about recognition and appropriation. In a similar way to intersectionality, this approach is used differently by different scholars, but has manifested itself into several key critical works. For example, for Harvey, appropriation means that city inhabitants should be able to influence how urban space is arranged (Harvey, 2017), whilst for Attoh this definition is contested but generally resolves around the idea of being able to actively "use" space (Attoh, 2011). The right to the city puts intersectionality into practice: can different groups use and experience the city with equal opportunities? The right to the city and intersectionality are important framing devices because they survey the breadth of diversity. The next part of this paper will discuss how in that in practice more complicated manifestations of exclusion slip between the cracks of the intersectional framework.

## The limitations of intersectionality in practice

Firstly, the scale of intersectionality has often been neglected when approaching diversity. The intersectional approach broadly recognises difference from the individual to the structural, however in practice this approach has been applied just to the micro-scale (Anthias, 2013). The focus on the individual over-emphasises the role that self-attribution of difference plays in the city. For example, Valentine expands upon this idea by criticising how early movements to locate geometries of oppression failed to recognise the fluid nature of identities (Valentine, 2007). Indeed, by applying Judith Butler's argument that 'if one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is' (Butler, 1990), Valentine argues that applications of intersectionality fail by essentialising or over-generalising what difference is. For example, these criticisms were presented by Zenzele Isoke in a case study of the murder of Sakia Gunn, a fifteen-year-old African American lesbian who was murdered in Newark, New Jersey in a hate crime (Stewart-Winter and Strub, 2018). Sakia Gunn was murdered on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2003 after rejecting male advances, and media and community responses almost unanimously focused either on Gunn's sexuality or her race as the cause of her death, but never together (Isoke, 2014). Isoke investigated the different responses from black queer women in Newark, and concludes how the essentialising of Sakia's identity to "black" or "queer" on an individual level dehumanised her (Isoke, 2014). In particular, LGBT+ political groups 'politicized her death by forgetting the complex aspects of her life that resulted in her death', whereas for black civil society she 'she was just another example of black on black violence' (Isoke, 2014). By essentialising her identity into these two axes, Sakia became a simulacrum of individual exclusion whilst simultaneously ignoring the specific mutually constructed structures of anti-black homophobia. Fundamentally, Sakia was not black or gay, she was black and gay. Her experiences of exclusion were irreducible to solely race or sexuality because her identity was more than the sum of its parts. Difference in this way cannot be broken down into separate axes but forms anew. Sakia's murder is a poignant reminder of how intersectionality can fail to be applied to all scales of

identity, producing an image of the city which is at once tokenistic but fails to understand how diversity is excluded.

Secondly, intersectionality fails to consider different rights to the city. Whilst the intersectional framework is effective in acknowledging difference, the appropriation of that difference is much more unclear. In theory the city should contain clear spaces of difference, but in practice the city displays the phenomenon of heterotopias. Coined by Michael Foucault, heterotopia means “an other place” or a space that is marginalised, containing multiple and contradictory meanings (Foucault, 1967). For example, Nero discusses the dimensions of heterotopias in his paper ‘Why are the Gay Ghettos White?’ (Nero, 2005). Gay living spaces, or “gaybourhoods” have been tokenised as symbols of inclusivity (Hubbard, 2012). However, Nero outlines that they remain hostile to black queer people. In the US, gaybourhood making replicates the racist practices of post-World War Two suburbanisation and red-lining, whereas their supposed inclusivity is marginalised into a white and marketable margin of the queer population (Nero, 2005). Therefore, the black queer experience asks: a right to *what* city (Merrifield, 2011)? Should queer black people be included in the predominantly white gaybourhood building, or should they create their own exclusionary spaces? Echoing the ideas of Attoh, the “use” of space can display heterotopic meanings, especially in the case where sexuality can be expressed differently due to race. Reconceptualising a right to the city means that in practice, black queer people exist in spaces that define and contradict their identities. Like Sakia, they are documented as both black or queer but almost never both in appropriating space. Thus, their rights to the city are eroded as less than the sum of their parts. Analysing diversity through a rights-based approach reveals that intersectionality can fail to describe the complex heterotopias that exist in urban space.

## Methodology

To examine how intersectionality theory translates into a lived geographic experience, I analysed the works of three contemporary authors who wrote about urban life. For this analysis, I specifically chose two interlocking axes of difference to focus on, i.e., race and sexuality, as a means to demonstrate the efficacy of intersectionality in the lived experience. How the writers portrayed these two axes relationally, and whether they experienced urban tensions specifically, in regards to their intersectional nature, could reveal if the intersectional framework was deemed accurate in practice.

For this close reading, I focus on the works of F. Spencer Irvin, Assotto Saint, and Donald H. Woods, three predominant queer black poets during the 1980s-90s United States. The queer black poetic scene in the US has historically been rich with commentary on the nature of race and sexual relations, and these authors in particular envelop their criticism within a localisation of urban space. The works I have chosen to demonstrate this close reading are texts that explicitly discuss the city and how the narrator chooses to identify themselves within it.

For this case study I use the terms black and queer to describe the authors and intellectual scene of the 1980s-90s because these fit the fluid but authorial nature of these writer's identities. All three of these poets describe themselves as 'black' and furthermore the term queer is effective at portraying non-heteronormative identities without retroactively pinning a label on work or artist that might not fit. Furthermore, these authors do not limit their discussion of sexuality to their own same-sex attraction, but also broadly discuss the realities of living as a queer black person within the city. Therefore, describing this through the term "queer" enables the close reading to examine the wider contextual realities of being queer in the city.

Finally, for this close reading I intentionally chose a case study rooted with literary geographies because I believe that looking beyond our own scope can reveal new sides to

urban geographic theory. By applying a close reading approach more typical in English Literature; dissecting and discussing how the form and language of the poem interprets meaning, these texts can function as qualitative sources for geographic enquiry. Within human geography, often social theories like intersectionality are difficult to exemplify within quantitative studies, and I believe that not shying away from an intensely contextual and qualitative approach can deepen how academics understand geographical thought. Therefore, for this case study I acknowledge that this is just one interpretation of these texts; however, this is still a valid means of examining qualitative data.

'Black Culture in the Park' by F. Spencer Irvin, 'Heart and Soul' by Assotto Saint, and 'Sister Lesbos' by Donald W. Woods, are chosen poems for this close reading. These three poems were chosen from a movement of black gay artists within the United States between the early 1980's and mid 1990's, led by poets and activists Assotto Saint and Joseph Beam. This movement was formed from the blossoming LGBT+ communities with San Francisco, New York, and Philadelphia as a result of the Gay Liberation from the 1960s, with groups of artists collaborating to understand the black gay experience, Significantly, these poets were fascinated with the concept of urban space, and how their dual lives of being black and gay manifested in radically different experiences of the same physical space.

Irvin, Saint, and Woods considered a unique geographical perspective within their works, which this paper will outline and explore by analysing an extract of their poetry. 'Black Culture in the Park' depicts the lives of black queer sex workers, homeless people, and the procession of men seeking sexual experiences within a city park. 'Heart and Soul' is a poem about dual allegiances to one's race and sexuality, described through the journey the narrator takes in leaving his house with two metal flag pins depicting the Pride and Black Liberation flag. 'Sister Lesbos' describes an encounter between a black gay man and a lesbian as they depart from their respective sexual encounters, finding solidarity in their similar but diverging concrete paths on the pavement.

Unfortunately, due to the HIV/AIDS crisis cutting these poet's lives short, these three works have been difficult to source digitally. Two publications of these poems exist, part of the activist response to the HIV/AIDS crisis by memorialising bay gay voices: *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* by Joseph Beam was published in 1986, and *The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets* by Assotto Saint was published in 1991.

## Results & Discussion

### Close Reading Results

Creative works by black queer artists can demonstrate how diversity in urban space is more complex than the theories about intersectionality or rights to the city belie. These three works understand the processes of inclusion and exclusion within urban spaces as effectively as quantitative studies.

'Black Culture in the Park' by F. Spencer Irvin exemplifies the spatialisation of the right to the city. Recreating a common theme in black queer poetry, Irvin situates his narrative in a liminal space of the "park". The park is in every way unclear, marginal, heterotopic. It is a site of queer identities, for example the act of "cruising" for sexual partners, yet also of inherent blackness: 'To the sassiest Divas; / The Black Bourgeoisie' (Irvin, 1991). Despite being a nameless, formless, and crucially ownerless public space, the landscape is radically appropriated by those passing through. Black culture asserts its rights to the city in this space, for example as a site of sexual acts. Irvin rejects the neo-liberal obsession with private property and ownership by asserting that these transitory and "spaceless" places can be equally valid as a space for culture, even if just for a night. There is indeed 'a lot of culture in the park' (Irvin, 1991), with black queer people claiming a right to appropriate it.



'Heart and Soul' by Assotto Saint is another poem that grapples with dual identities, or the contradictory heterotopias that black queer artists write about. This poem explicitly pairs the dual loyalties of being black and being queer as a kind of 'double brotherhood' (Saint, 1991). By invoking the symbolism of patriotism and pride, Saint deliberately questions the visibility of black queer people in the United States. Juxtaposing the Pride and Black Liberation flag, Saint colours the literal and metaphorical world of black and white race and sexuality:

'one floats rainbow / the other wings tricolor / both bold with movement / i am not ashamed' (Saint, 1991).

Saint builds a visual world of colour and 'beauty spots' amid a polemical argument between white queer pride and black solidarity. Saint rejects both extremes; that he is proud of both his blackness and homosexuality. 'Heart and Soul' contests the divide between the two worlds of black and queer, existing in a mutually constructed and colourful alignment to dual identities. Saint's poem exemplifies the unique experience of black queer people, and how their identities can be sometimes contradictory, but equally valid and irreducible.

'Sister Lesbos' is only poem in this extract that covers both the black lesbian and gay experience of the city; but writers like Donald W. Woods frequently discussed the struggles of both groups in black queer criticism. 'Sister Lesbos' describes a fragment of the invisible, liminal world that black queer people exist in. This poem emphasises movement- the 'paths' and 'directions' of black queerness only belonging in spaces of transit or ambiguity (Woods, 1986). Woods's uses the term 'family' to suggest how the experiences of black gays and lesbians are related but distinct; their sexuality, race and gender identity intersect to create something new. Furthermore, Woods develops a rhetoric of solidarity with his lesbian sisters:

'What we've shared / is the strength / to be apart / what we seek / is the strength / to be together.' (Woods, 1986)

By finding pride in distinct black queer experiences, 'Sister Lesbos' highlights how in theory intersectionality can value multi-layered identities, but in practice pits them against each other in a hierarchical divide (Valentine, 2007). Marginalised groups compete for the right to be most different, that their struggles against exclusion can only be justified as a sum of their layered identities. Instead, Woods reiterates the language of solidarity and unity, and in turn thinks beyond intersectional thought to imagine identity not as interlocking characteristics, but inseparably intertwined. Woods imagines a more hopeful future where people like 'Sister Lesbos' are not defined as Black Gay or Gay Black (Smith, 1986), but as an identity that is inseparable from both these things. 'Sister Lesbos' is an interesting poem to study in the context of intersectionality and urban diversity because it imagines a way forward in understanding difference.

'Black Culture in the Park', 'Heart and Soul', and 'Sister Lesbos' are extracts of the fascinating body of work that is black queer poetry, and are useful for analysing how geographical concepts function in the human experience. These three poems demonstrate the concepts of difference, intersectionality, and rights to the city in ways that situate the black queer experience within urban space. Fundamentally, these writers have recognized that their identities are inexorably linked to the spatial practices around them. Therefore, we must also question the roles that space plays in understanding difference in the city.

### Thinking Beyond: Intersectionality and Space

Thus far my critique of intersectionality has focused on its conception of difference, however, finally we must also consider its foundations in space. Theories about the city are ultimately situated into the principle of socio-spatial dialectic. The term socio-spatial dialectic is derived by Edward Soja from comparing the conclusions of David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre about the influence of space on rights to the city (Soja, 1980). The term outlines how the relationship between social and spatial structures influence each other's

development, for example how an appropriation of urban space can influence how it is organised and vice versa. This relates to difference in the city because despite theories of intersectionality, in practice, black gay men find themselves ostracised from both the African-American “homespace” and the predominantly white queer “gaybourhoods” (Konrad, 2014). Joseph Beam in his manifesto *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* described how queer black identities exist on the fringe of society and space:

‘I cannot go home as who I am... I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or am tolerated if I am silenced and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply.’ (Beam, 1986)

In essence, these axes of difference describe the struggles of a socio-spatial dialectic. Faced by structures of oppression that ostracise both their queer, black, and hybrid identities, black queers resort to appropriating the side-lines- a symptom of Young’s ‘cultural imperialism’ whereby their identities are rendered both invisible as subjects and as ‘Other’ by the dominant norm (Young, 1990). Queer black writers reflect these ideas of cultural imperialism through the lens of invisibility (Konrad, 2014), or an internal conflict of feeling forced to choose between “gay” and “black”, privileging a kind of racial or sexual division (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, 1993). Queer black people grapple with the primacy of both their racial and sexual identities (Bowleg, 2013), a conflict that stems from the intersectional idea that difference can be tolerated as equal, but not respected as such. This creates a cycle of reproducing the exclusionary forces of invisibility, and furthermore a social and culture norm of black shame and queer powerlessness. Intersectionality considers these experiences to be irreducible and unique, which is certainly true, however these experiences are widespread and powerful enough to form feedback loops with the very space that these people inhabit. Therefore, transitory spaces of queer black practices are determined to remain marginal. Diversity in the city is at once deeper and more complex when we realise the potential of hybrid identities within intersectionality theory. The failure to stretch the notion of interlocking axes of difference within urban geography is a failure to apply the full

potential of intersectionality in practice. Therefore, integrating the socio-spatial dialectic back into an intersectional approach reveals a way to look beyond the scale of the individual and into the relationship between difference and space.

## Conclusion

As a site of inclusion or exclusion, the city engages with difference in a much deeper way than theories like intersectionality would suggest. However, through an analysis of two specific axes of difference, the experiences of black queer people and their relationship with urban space, I believe that intersectionality could be more meaningfully used when it challenges the definition of difference. Human geographers have failed to use the greatest strengths of intersectionality to push past the conventional borders of what constitutes identity and difference. By stepping away from the rigid labels in a world of colour and fluidity, axes of difference can reveal how people engage with the city in deeper, transitory, and sometimes contradictory ways, making the urban experience even richer.

## Author Profile

Sophie Russell is currently studying BA Geography and English Literature at the University of Exeter. This piece was written during her Study Abroad at University College Cork, Ireland, as part of her third-year coursework.

Correspondence address: [serus0105@outlook.com](mailto:serus0105@outlook.com)

## References:

Anthias, F. (2013) 'Intersectional what? Social divisions, intersectionality and levels of analysis', *Ethnicities*, 13(1), pp. 3–19. doi: 10.1177/1468796812463547.

Attoh, K. A. (2011) 'What kind of right is the right to the city?', *Progress in Human*

*Geography*, 35(5), pp. 669–685. doi: 10.1177/0309132510394706.

Beam, J. (1986) 'Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart', in Beam, J. (ed.) *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. Washington: Redbone Press, pp. 180–191.

Bowleg, L. (2013) "'Once You've Blended the Cake, You Can't Take the Parts Back to the Main Ingredients': Black Gay and Bisexual Men's Descriptions and Experiences of Intersectionality', *Sex Roles*, 68(11–12), pp. 754–767. doi: 10.1007/s11199-012-0152-4.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), pp. 465–487. doi: 10.3917/drs1.108.0465.

Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, A. (1993) "'Black Gay Male" Discourse : Reading Race and Sexuality between the Lines', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 3(3), pp. 468–490.

Foucault, M. (1967) 'Of other spaces', in Dehaene, M. and De Cauter, L. (eds) *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Post-civil society*. 1st edn. New York: Routledge.

Harvey, D. (2017) 'The right to the city', *Citizenship Rights*, pp. 464–482. doi: 10.4324/9781315260211.

Hubbard, P. (2012) 'Conclusion', in *Cities and Sexualities*. Oxford: Routledge, pp. 204–209. doi: 10.1212/01.con.0000436148.93543.f9.

Irvin, F. S. (1991) 'Black Culture in the Park', in Saint, A. (ed.) *The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets*. 1st ed. Galiens Press.

Isoke, Z. (2014) 'Can't I be seen? Can't I be heard? Black women queering politics in Newark', *Gender, Place and Culture*. Taylor & Francis, pp. 353–369. doi: 10.1080/0966369X.2013.781015.

Konrad, C. L. (2014) 'This is where we live: queering poor urban spaces in literature of black gay men', *Gender, Place and Culture*. Taylor & Francis, pp. 337–352. doi: 10.1080/0966369X.2013.781014.

Lefebvre, H. (1968) *The Right to the City*. 1st edn. Paris: Anthropos.

Merrifield, A. (2011) 'The right to the city and beyond: Notes on a Lefebvrian re-conceptualization', *City*, 15(3–4), pp. 473–481. doi: 10.1080/13604813.2011.595116.

Nero, C. I. (2005) 'Why are the Gay Ghettos White?', in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical*

*Anthology*. Duke University Press.

Raco, M. (2018) 'Living with diversity: Local social imaginaries and the politics of intersectionality in a super-diverse city', *Political Geography*, 62, pp. 149–159. doi: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.11.003.

Saint, A. (1991) 'Heart and Soul', in Saint, A. (ed.) *The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets*. 1st ed. Galiens Press.

Scott, J. and Marshall, G. (2014) 'Intersectionality', *A Dictionary of Sociology*. 4th ed. Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/acref/9780199533008.001.0001.

Smith, M. C. (1986) 'By the Year 2000', in Beam, J. (ed.) *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. Washington: Redbone Press, pp. 175–179.

Soja, E. W. (1980) 'The Socio-Spatial Dialectic', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 70(2), pp. 207–225.

Stewart-Winter, T. and Strub, W. (2018) *The Murder of Sakia Gunn and LGBT Anti-violence Mobilization, OutHistory*. Available at: <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/queer-newark/murder-of-sakia-gunn> (Accessed: 20 March 2022).

Valentine, G. (2007) 'Theorizing and researching intersectionality: A challenge for feminist geography', *Professional Geographer*, 59(1), pp. 10–21. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9272.2007.00587.x.

Woods, D. W. (1986) 'Sister Lesbos', in Beam, J. (ed.) *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. Washington: Redbone Press, p. 68.

Young, I. M. (1990) 'The Scaling of Bodies and the Politics of Identity', in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Revised. Princeton University Press, pp. 122–55.