

# Gatherings

---

Volume 1  
Issue 1 *Exploring Feminist Place-Making*

Article 7

---

April 2024

## Black Queer Feminist Placemaking and the Normalization of Difference

Jaynelle D. Nixon  
*Syracuse University*, [jdnixon@syr.edu](mailto:jdnixon@syr.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/gatherings>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nixon, Jaynelle D. (2024) "Black Queer Feminist Placemaking and the Normalization of Difference," *Gatherings*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 7.  
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/gatherings/vol1/iss1/7>

This document is posted at <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/gatherings/vol1/iss1/7> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at . For more information, please contact [fisherpub@sjf.edu](mailto:fisherpub@sjf.edu).

---

## Black Queer Feminist Placemaking and the Normalization of Difference

### Abstract

This article examines feminist placemaking through a Black feminist lens that employs queer of color critique. It argues that the most important aspect of Black feminist placemaking is an acknowledgment of nonhierarchical difference. Once difference is acknowledged as the norm within any truly feminist space, Black feminist placemaking must be active. This form of placemaking cannot be merely theoretical. Black feminist placemaking must be praxis.

### Keywords

placemaking, othering, Black feminism, feminist theory, Queer of Color Critique

# Black Queer Feminist Placemaking and the Normalization of Difference

Jaynelle D. Nixon, PhD  
Syracuse University

**Abstract:** This article examines feminist placemaking through a Black feminist lens that employs queer of color critique. It argues that the most important aspect of Black feminist placemaking is an acknowledgment of nonhierarchical difference. Once difference is acknowledged as the norm within any truly feminist space, Black feminist placemaking must be active. This form of placemaking cannot be merely theoretical. Black feminist placemaking must be praxis.

**Keywords:** *Placemaking, Othering, Black feminism, Feminist theory, Queer of Color Critique*

In *A Voice from the South* (1892), Anna Julia Cooper claims, “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing for special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me’” (31). The term “intersectionality” did not exist during Cooper’s lifetime, but she is unequivocally arguing that the intersection of misogyny and racism that Black women experience is such that when Black women are free to enter spaces/places without fear or threats of violence, all Black people will be able to do so. This is because when the most marginalized people feel (and are) safe, seen, acknowledged, and welcomed, all will be safe, seen, acknowledged, and welcomed. She is arguing for normalcy. Contrary to what many believe, normalcy does not negate the power or beauty of difference. Feminist placemaking must recognize and normalize difference.

The recognition of difference is often viewed as a way of “othering” those who do not fit into the norm. Yet, as Adrian Piper explains, “I am, after all, not an other to myself” (2003, 243). In other words, othering is reciprocal. We may see people or groups as

"others," but to those people or groups we ourselves are the "others." Imagining oneself as an "other" can be jarring, especially if one is part of a dominant group. Nonetheless, this realization of the reciprocal nature of othering can be liberating and result in the normalization of difference. If we are all an other's other, we are all different, and difference no longer serves to reinforce artificial hierarchies of normalcy. At its most basic definition, "normal" simply means typical, usual, or ordinary. If we are all different in comparison, difference is the norm.

Furthermore, race and gender are not the only forms of difference that must be acknowledged in feminist placemaking. The intersections of queer and disabled must be attended to along with class difference. When queerness, disability, and class are accounted for, the compounded nature of marginalization becomes apparent. This is what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to when she discusses "those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (1987, 3). Put another way, these are people who deviate from established norms in myriad ways that include sexuality, gender nonconformity, and physicality. In her discussion of borderlands, Anzaldúa is analyzing normalcy through the culturally established hierarchy that relegates those of us who are multiply othered to the borders of normalcy. A feminist place does not relegate anyone to the borders. Difference cannot be equated with deviance in a feminist space.

A feminist space/place does not ask that we conform to societal norms. Additionally, a feminist space does not ignore difference. Difference must be met head on with acknowledgment, respect, and acceptance. As Audre Lorde explains, we are not separated by difference. We are separated by hierarchical assumptions of difference (1995, 376). Once the oppressive hierarchies of difference are removed, difference is no longer deviant. Difference simply becomes the natural state of being. When this occurs in a feminist space, all will feel welcome in that space.

However, feminist placemaking is more than mere feeling. A feminist place/space is not simply metaphorical or theoretical. Feminist placemaking is praxis. It necessitates action, dedication, and determination that result in physical feminist space. The need for material reality cannot be ignored. Those of us who experience violence based on our differences do not have the luxury of limiting feminist placemaking to discourse. Katherine McKittrick discusses the violence that occurs when racism and space converge and argues that "part of our intellectual task is, then, to perhaps get in touch

with the materiality of our analytical worlds” (2020, 11). In other words, our discourse should aim for material reality. How does the physical place I have been discussing look? How does it function? What is present in this space?

If difference is truly recognized, the feminist place will be apparent. For example, feminist placemaking requires accessibility. People of all abilities will be accommodated within this space. A space that excludes by design is not a feminist place. If all are welcome, it will be assured that all can physically enter. Feminist placemaking also necessitates diversity. Even feminist places that are group specific should be diverse because no group is a monolith. Marginalized groups (and multiply othered members within a group) should be able to see themselves in the artwork, literature, programs, staff, and volunteers of a feminist place. Finally, a feminist place must provide resources for those who need them because a feminist space recognizes economic disparities.

Understanding the myriad ways people are othered and queered and actively working to normalize difference is the praxis of Black queer feminist placemaking. This requires intention and action on the part of those with the power to create feminist spaces. Asking questions and listening to the needs of others is of the utmost importance, but being proactive is a necessity. A feminist place is not one that simply tells marginalized people to share their needs and concerns. No one should have to ask to be included. People should know they are included by the accessibility and diversity of the space. A long history of excluding marginalized groups and a long history of marginalized groups needing to fight for basic rights places the onus of normalizing difference squarely on the shoulders of those in power.

To paraphrase and broaden Anna Julia Cooper’s concept, when a queer, disabled, Black woman from any socio-economic class is able to enter a space “in the quiet dignity” of her personhood, “without violence and without suing for special patronage, then and there, the whole [Human] race enters with” her into that welcoming feminist place.

## References

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

Cooper, Anna Julia. *A Voice from the South*. Xenia, The Aldine Printing House, 1892.

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/cooper/cooper.html>

Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, The New Press, 1995, pp. 367-378.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Dear Science: And Other Stories*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2021.

Piper, Adrian. "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 239-246.



Jaynelle D. Nixon, PhD

Visiting Assistant Teaching Professor

Department of Women's and Gender Studies

Syracuse University

Dr. Nixon is an interdisciplinary scholar. Her research interests focus on the body and how certain bodies are surveilled and treated in public space.