

‘Like signposts on the road’: The Function of Literacy in Constructing Black Queer Ancestors

Eric Darnell Pritchard University of Texas, Austin

ABSTRACT

Previous scholarship in literacy and composition has noted the importance and function of ancestors in the literacy and rhetorical practices of descendants. However, such research has not explored how ancestorship functions for people at the marginalized intersection of racialized otherness and queer sexualities and genders. This article offers one response to this gap by reporting on the role of literacy in the life stories of sixty Black queer people residing in various regions across the United States who named historical erasure as a particularly detrimental form of oppression enacted by, though subverted through, literacy. An analysis of participants’ uses of literacy to navigate historical erasure reveals that as participants encounter historical erasure, they disrupt its negative impact through four patterns of ancestorship: (1) literacy is used to create, discover, and affirm relationships to ancestors; (2) ancestors model the multiplicity of identities as a category of rhetorical analysis; (3) descendants’ identity formation/affirmation is affected by an ancestors’ writing and lives; and (4) descendants receive cross-generational mandates to become ancestors through literacy. Further, while African American literacies and LGBTQ literacies have each emerged as potent areas of scholarship in literacy and composition studies, the absence of a sustained and substantive discussion at the intersection of both areas contributes to a larger critical vacuum in rhetoric and composition in which we have overlooked the literacy and composition practices shaped at the intersection of race and queerness. This article begins to address this oversight through an in-depth exploration of a specific literacy and rhetorical practice among Black LGBTQ people.

KEYWORDS

literacy; ancestorship; African American; LGBT; queer; race; sexuality; gender; pedagogy; Black Queer theory; qualitative research; intersectionality; historical erasure

Black people have been here before us and survived. We can read their lives like signposts on the road and find . . . that each one of us is here because somebody before us did something to make it possible We have the power those who came before us have given us, to move beyond the place where they were standing. (Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 60s" 138, 144)

If we don't keep in touch with the ancestor... we are, in fact, lost. (Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" 344)

History matters for Stephanie Flowers,¹ who in 1987, at the age of 18 and in her first semester at an Ivy League university, came out as a Black lesbian. The community in which she came out was one of White lesbian feminists; she described the experience as rewarding yet difficult, because she learned "to be an activist around queer issues and around race issues in the queer community But at the same time, it was born out of painful encounters with people." There were no visible queer or queer-of-color spaces on her campus, and she had no access to or awareness of Black lesbian history—and she maintains that this especially detrimental form of historical erasure adversely affected her personal and intellectual development. Flowers encountered significant levels of racism within this community; however, she was able to use activist tools—including preparing and disseminating pamphlets, organizing consciousness raising sessions and ally workshops, and reflective exercises such as journaling—to achieve cognizance of racial diversity and racism in both her lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) space and her feminist space. Key to this transformation was Flowers's introduction to Black lesbian feminist writers. When searching for support of this transformation, she discovered Pat Parker's poetry collection *Movement in Black* (1978) and Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982):

a friend of mine, another Black lesbian at school, gave me an Audre Lorde book and I was like amazed. You know, I'd never heard another human being articulate things that were so deep and meaningful that I felt that she was also feeling and willing to put down on a page and someone who also identified as a Black lesbian, and political, and "Out," and taking risks, and describing that fear of standing up for yourself and acknowledging that you feel bad and you do it anyway I feel like [Lorde] gave me courage to do a lot of things. Pat Parker also. Just reading about risks that they're willing to take in their lives, you know, and there was always a sense of that understanding that you were never meant to survive, so trying to protect yourself in some way by living in whatever closet is not going to help you survive.

Historical rootedness is vital to Flowers's survival: the words of Black lesbian ancestors like Lorde and Parker changed her life. In the same interview, she also described literacy as a set of "survival techniques," and she easily recalled episodes when she used her literacy as a means to access

Black LGBTQ ancestors in order to survive. Flowers's definition of literacy mirrors that of many in literacy and composition studies, including myself and Jacqueline Jones Royster, who describes literacy as what happens when we "gain access to information" and proceed to "use this information . . . to articulate lives and experiences and also to identify, think through, refine, and solve problems, sometimes complex problems, over time" (Royster 45). This theme expressed by Flowers resounded across the interviews I conducted with sixty Black LGBTQ people about everyday literacy practices and a range of issues concerning their personal identities, in which more than three-quarters of the interviewees, like Flowers, affirmed this point: historical rootedness is a key ingredient to Black LGBTQ identity construction, affirmation, values, ways of knowing, and ways of being. This perspective evinces, as Gwen Gorzelsky writes, "the various roles literate practices can play and the personal and social effects they can foster" (5). Unfortunately, for many Black LGBTQ people, literacy practices that offer the achievement and gifts of rootedness are interrupted by the erasure of Black queer history. In this context, historical erasure operates as the omission, occlusion, or ignoring of Black LGBTQ people, their contributions, and lived experiences. In effect, historical erasure is a deterrent to the full opportunities for growth, affirmation, and community made possible through literacy practices aimed at achieving rootedness.

This article examines the recursive practice of historical erasure as a misuse of literacy experienced by Black LGBTQ people and the centrality of literacy to remedying the negative impact of historical erasure on these individuals. For sure, as Harvey Graff writes in the inaugural issue of *Literacy in Composition Studies*, "[t]he roster of literacy studies' commissions and omissions is lengthy" (17). The link I draw from literacy to historical erasure adds yet another item to that roster. But I am drawn to what the offenses of historical erasure and its consequences can tell us in the way of literacies that are uniquely formed in such an event. Focusing on Black LGBTQ life and culture, I argue that historical erasure places a unique pressure on an individual's literacies under which reading and writing are two acts that may excavate hidden histories from the rubble of unrecognition and develop ancestorship. Thus, my analysis emphasizes the role of literacy in creating and discovering ancestors, as well as the impact on an individual's literacy practices afterward, the combination of which shows ancestors to be, as Deborah Brandt has offered, "sponsors of literacy . . . any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (19). In my research, ancestors—deceased individuals with whom research participants had no known blood relations—are assuredly "distant" and "abstract" figures who "enable," "support," "teach," and "model" Black queer literacies for research participants. Through the tenacious reading, research, and writing that descendants employ to engage them, ancestors gain the advantage of being resurrected from the slow death of historical erasure. In quests for rootedness, my research participants form an array of literacies to subvert the negative effects of historical erasure.

On the basis of research participants' life stories, I propose four patterns of ancestorship as developed through literacy: (1) literacy is used to create, discover, and affirm relationships to

ancestors; (2) ancestors model the multiplicity of identities as a category of rhetorical analysis; (3) descendants' identity formation/affirmation is affected by an ancestors' writing and lives; and (4) descendants receive cross-generational mandates to become ancestors through literacy. In each of these patterns, Black LGBTQ people and their allies appropriate literacy to identify and explicate historical erasure: what it is, what its effects are, how it happens, and how to challenge it. This range of recursive literacies characterizes the discursive relations between ancestors and descendants and demonstrates how Black queers use literacy to form relationships with ancestors to address historical erasure when they uncover buried histories, engender Black queer identity formation and affirmation, create genealogical links, and preserve cultural traditions. I categorize such literacy practices as *life-fashioning*,² which refers to the ways in which one achieves self-care, resistance, collective empowerment, and personal affirmation. The focuses of life-fashioning herein are those identifiable literacy practices Black queers employ or create when faced with historical erasure. After examining four patterns of ancestorship developed through literacy, I conclude with a discussion of the implications of my findings for curriculum and theory within the studies of literacy and composition. For example, I describe the need to reconsider how we conceptualize identity in historical and theoretical contexts within literacy, rhetoric, and composition. I also posit how the reading and writing practices examined in my analysis can serve to generate further studies of the relationships among literacy, history, and formation of identity, and I discuss the implications for literacy and composition pedagogy.

Indeed, the theme of ancestorship and literacy has deep roots within literacy and composition studies. Jacqueline Jones Royster has often noted the ways that intellectual heritage matters in our positions as researchers, teachers, and learners. Reflecting on her work with primarily African American female students in Spelman College's writing program, Royster writes that, like her students learning about the intellectual heritage of their Black women foremothers, scholars' "pursuit of intellectual authority can be informed and sanctioned by their conscious and specific awareness of the historical conditions and circumstances of others like themselves" (266). For her students, discovering their intellectual and cultural connection to Black women essayists and orators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped them "to fashion for themselves their own authority to speak, to write, to learn, and to produce when they can determine, not just the resonance of their own lives with others, but also the dissonance" (267-68). Here Royster describes the students' mandate to use literacy and rhetoric to continue the work of their ancestors who used the essay to seek social change for Black women, but she acknowledges that the students must seek change according to the conditions of their present. My focus on Black LGBTQ people, a group that has not received any significant attention within literacy, composition, or rhetorical studies, provides initial insight into not only the intellectual heritage from which Black LGBTQ people draw, but also the ways in which their literacies shape and are shaped by their lived experiences at the intersections of race and queerness.

Much as Royster characterizes the impact of ancestors as intellectual heritage on her students,

Malea Powell eloquently describes the impact of her own ancestors on the mandates she feels to write and contribute to the field, detailing the ways “ghost stories” are “rooted in other knowledges, other ways of being and becoming that frequently go unheard and unsaid” (12). Powell “think[s] a lot about what ghost stories can teach us, how in telling them [she] might both honor the knowledge that isn’t honored in universities and do so in a way that interweaves these stories with more recognizable academic theorizing as well” (12). Powell emphasizes the function of literacy in producing ancestorship that exposes the exclusion of what Toni Morrison has called “discredited knowledges” (342), and the usefulness of such exposure to recovering these marginalized epistemologies and ontologies from economies of knowledge that overlook them. My focus affirms the practice of literacy mobilized to produce ancestorship, while also pointing toward the necessity of understanding this theory and praxis from the specific positionalities that various groups have to history and its unique effects on conceptions of and access to ancestorship, as well as the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which those groups experience and employ literacies. My comments center on the meanings Black LGBTQ people give to their literacies, and how they employ them on their own terms. Doing so, I posit the ways scholars might further investigate the uses of literacy in the pervasiveness of historical erasure and also the production of ancestorship for a diversity of other individuals and groups, each providing some additional insight that may resonate for the future of literacy and composition theory and pedagogy.

Implicit in Royster’s and Powell’s claims is a recursive trope for literacy: its interconnections and disconnections with identities. For both, identity emerges in the form of ancestorship coded as intellectual heritage, ghosts, and the fuel each provides for the purposing of one’s literacies in relationship to history. Further drawing such interconnections, Villanueva links literacy and identity to history by way of memory, noting “connections between narratives by people of color and the

“Through the tenacious reading, research, and writing that descendants employ to engage them, ancestors gain the advantage of being resurrected from the slow death of historical erasure. In quests for rootedness, my research participants form an array of literacies to subvert the negative effects of historical erasure.”

need to reclaim a memory, memory of an identity in formation, constant reformation, the need to reclaim memory of an identity as formed through the generations . . . the need to reclaim and retain the memory of the imperial lords, those who have forcibly changed the identities of people of color through colonization” (269). What Villanueva points to is the necessity of thinking of the ways identities and language are formed and

reformed across generations and exist as a historical continuum. In this article I take incidents of historical erasure and the omission of Black queer history, life, culture, and ancestors from historical records as acts of oppression in that they interrupt or close off the possibility of accessing and making use of the historical continuum of one’s identity and literacies. Through this approach I reclaim historical erasure as a generative site for the theorization of an array of literacy practices, as literacy is

prevalent in the act of erasure itself and in the various interventions my research participants pursue in the construction of Black queer ancestorship. Further, Villanueva's focus on narrative is critical because it is the genre by which most descendants discover ancestors and are affirmed, mandated, and challenged. These narratives are encoded in books, personal documents, oral histories, talk and other "texts," and themselves become the model for the uses of writing and other literacies by descendants. For example, in my research I note that it is through writing that many ancestors model for research participants the importance of telling their own stories as an intervention into historical erasure, a challenge that some of the research participants take up as evidenced in their own uses of writing to leave roots that may inspire and make life better for the next generation of Black LGBTQ people. This writing might include coming-out stories, creative non-fiction, and so on. Thus, research participants mimic the ways ancestors were trailblazers for later generations.

My theorization of the four patterns of ancestorship developed through literacy, as well as my definition of historical erasure and ancestorship, is based on analysis of the sixty original in-depth interviews I conducted. I began doing these interviews in 2007. I located interviewees through a number of means, including community organizations, online social networks, personal acquaintances, nightclubs, faith/worship centers, and other social spaces. The result of this recruitment process was a pool of research participants representing diversity of region, age, sex, sexual identity, gender identity and expression, economic class, educational attainment, religious and spiritual affiliation (or non-affiliation), and family-of-origin structure. Each interviewee self-identified as a Black LGBTQ person and was born between 1940 and 1991. Interviewees were aged 18–70 years at the time of our discussion and resided in regions across the United States.

I conducted interviews exploring questions at the intersection of Blackness, queerness, and literacy.³ My questions did not directly pursue history or ancestorship itself, but I did inquire about interviewees' general thoughts on contemporary Black LGBTQ life including political issues, cultural productions (books, films, musicians, visual artists), and online social networks. The original purpose of the study was to investigate all the major features of the literacy practices of Black LGBTQ people. Interviews lasted approximately 2.5–3 hours. I conducted most interviews in person; however, in order to achieve demographic diversity, particularly in terms of geography, I completed a number of phone interviews using the same script. These interviews yielded hundreds of hours of audio-taped dialogue, which was transcribed, coded, and categorized. These coded data form the basis for the conceptual claims herein.

I coded and analyzed interview data inductively according to grounded theory, a research methodology that stresses a close, systematic, and thorough search of a participant's in-depth life story and the analysis of patterns to form strong conceptual explanations.⁴ Although my larger book project explores several patterns that emerged from a grounded close reading of the data—*literacy terror*, *literacy concealment*, and *fictive kinship*, for example—this article focuses more narrowly on the specific pattern of ancestorship as developed through literacy. To explore the theme of ancestorship, I highlight the stories of several participants whose experiences illustrate trends that crossed life-story

accounts. In the following sections, I illustrate the four patterns of ancestorship that are developed from analysis of research participants' life stories. Through these patterns, we come to a better understanding of how Black LGBTQ people construct ancestors and seek to counteract and prevent historical erasure through their literacy practices. Thus, this article provides an in-depth analysis of a particular literacy practice shaped at the intersections of Blackness and queerness, with implications for current conceptions of literacy history, theory, and pedagogy.

ANCESTORS AND ANCESTORSHIP IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Although many scholars have acknowledged historical erasures, none have examined their reoccurrence and their impact on literacy learning and practice—a glaring oversight, given that literacy is a robust part of burying or unearthing the past, as evidenced through the uses of print and other literacy tools to construct historical narratives that exclude Black queer life and contributions.⁵ When literacy is implicated in acts of historical erasure, such uses of literacy engender normative race, gender, and sexual politics by creating an historical vacuum. For Black LGBTQ people, the effect of this historical vacuum is that the evidence of Black LGBTQ identity, life, and culture through which many people move and be in the world—to create and affirm themselves, form community, and fashion social and political critique—is disappeared from historical records, memory, and public discourse. This practice serves the interests of normativizing ways of being, by erasing any evidence of nonnormativity from which Black queers may achieve rootedness, draw inspiration, and fuel defiance, resistance, or rebellion to these norms. These normative politics grow from racist and heteropatriarchal hegemony, creating conditions in which Black queers have reason to be concerned about their psychological and physical safety, as well as their place in the economies of knowledge production and cultural capital that determine how individuals and groups are (de)valued and (mis)represented. My research has shown that ancestor figures are a primary source of intervention to individuals and groups when faced with such troubling practices. Analyzing uses of literacy to produce connections to one's ancestors provides insight into a range of literacies that enhance our epistemologies of the nexus of language, identity, history, and culture as they are employed to counteract or prevent historical erasure.

Honoring ancestors is a feature of the traditions of many African and African Diasporic peoples. Numerous scholars “corroborate the existence of ancestor veneration among enslaved Africans” (Fairley 545).⁶ This is especially true of slave religious and spiritual practices such as the *ring shout*, which continues today throughout the African Diaspora, as well as rituals like performing libations, the ceremonial pouring of water or other drinks to show respect for ancestors and other divinities. Nancy J. Fairley says that ancestors are believed to have “a vested authority and interest in the social and physical conditions of their kin” (551). Thus, a part of honoring ancestors is appealing to them in the afterlife for their wisdom and counsel. In my research, ancestors refer to the dead

whom research participants identified as inspirational for Black and LGBTQ people. Some research participants named as ancestors people with whom they shared Black queer identity, while others did not require a shared identity to identify someone as an ancestor. Establishing this connection to ancestors often occurred through what I view as a research participant's tenacious reading, a phrase I use to characterize the vigor and depth with which people read a text against the popular interpretation or normative views. In the case of ancestors, those texts include widely circulated background information including biographical details such as government records, memoirs, and news reports. Through this tenacious reading, research participants accumulated enough information

“For instance, some participants described the ways in which an ancestor’s life and work communicated to them how to survive and thrive in the midst of oppression. In turn, these participants felt called to use their own literacies to create texts that will similarly support later generations, thus anticipating their role as ancestors to those yet to come.”

to sufficiently satisfy whatever requirements they applied for someone to be named an ancestor when much historical evidence had been erased. My focus is on how literacy serves to develop relationships with one's ancestors that then assist life-fashioning—in particular, as a means to disrupt historical erasure and promote identity formation and affirmation. I examine the function of literacy in the construction of ancestry by people who have encountered a unique form of historical erasure at the nexus of Black racial and queer gender and sexual identities.

The most frequently cited ancestors among my research participants are those who were published writers, for reading and writing are a primary means

by which individuals form intimate ties across space, time, and circumstance. Memoirs, speeches, poems, and other personal writing were especially prevalent as texts through which research participants developed rootedness. Timothy Barnett writes, “‘personal’ writing can provide an important entry into an analysis of social forces . . . personal writing can help students understand personal lives as linked to and reflective of social and political norms” (356). This is an argument that holds in the case of my research participants who draw upon the personal writing of ancestors to understand society's perceptions of Black queerness within the social and political norms across time. Extending this assessment of personal writing, I see research participants as finding a variety of other uses specific to the violence of historical erasure. Research participants are also using personal writing to amplify the social and political critiques in ancestors' writing that are ignored, to construct their own understandings of Black queerness that is unique to their own times, to affirm their connection to Black queer culture and community, and to affirm the usefulness of their own experiences, and indeed their own personal writing, as a foundation on which to formulate their own critiques and interventions into contemporary iterations of social and political issues. Published writing and archival documentation are among the default teaching tools and acceptable forms of documentation within schools, particularly within higher education, as well as the enterprise of

knowledge production, authentication, deployment, and consumption in general. Thus, it is not surprising that access to historical records contributed to decisions about who might be considered an ancestor, for many Black LGBTQ people frequently rely on reading and writing to suture the gaps left by historical erasure, cementing the influence of published writers and others whose documents have been documented in news reports, archival collections, and other public records. Many of these ancestors share identities with research participants, are people whom research participants learned about through tenacious reading, and who were also published writers or who left written records. Those cited most by research participants were poet Audre Lorde; activist, orator, and writer Bayard Rustin (a lead organizer of the 1963 March on Washington); writer James Baldwin; poet Pat Parker; writer and activist Joseph Beam; poet and essayist Essex Hemphill; and writer and artist Richard Bruce Nugent. Each of these individuals addressed, in various forms (memoirs, poems, short stories, speeches, and editorials), the particularities of being both Black and LGBTQ.

Ancestors are also those whom research participants felt introduced them to the theme of intersectionality from a Black queer perspective; subsequently, one can access this theme to construct and revise one's own sense of self. Numerous research participants described the challenges of trying to give language to their sense of Black queer identity and were discouraged from or encountered barriers to engaging the themes of Black queerness in writing by ancestors. In some instances these details were deliberately marginalized, particularly in classroom settings and other instances where research participants were required to read or otherwise learn about the lives of particular writers. For example, some research participants attended high school and college composition and

“Such application of critical imagination is a literacy practice in itself, as it requires research participants to read the historical times and social world in which the ancestor lived as a way to form plausible details for a background that has been erased, then formulate stories through which they as descendants are connected to those ancestors.”

literature classes where the works of writers like Audre Lorde and James Baldwin were taught in earnest, but noted that absent from instruction in those courses were matters of raced queerness. Participants, thus, continuously incurred the labor of having to excavate the identities and other details of the ancestor's life in order to create, identify, or affirm a

relationship with them. Consequently, research participants described tenacious reading that served to bring to their attention the themes of race, gender, and sexual identity that were being suppressed in their class readings and lectures. This literacy practice brought about other literacy practices, such as when participants often raised these issues in class discussions contrary to instructors' expressed interests.

Finally, many described ancestors as those with whom research participants felt a shared sense of purpose to use literacy to inspire, support, and challenge future generations of Black LGBTQ people. For instance, some participants described the ways in which an ancestor's life and work

communicated to them how to survive and thrive in the midst of oppression. In turn, these participants felt called to use their own literacies to create texts that will similarly support later generations, thus anticipating their role as ancestors to those yet to come. In this way, ancestors are those who have called out through their writings and life details, thereby exemplifying to research participants how to employ their literacies to do the same.

FOUR PATTERNS OF ANCESTORSHIP DEVELOPED THROUGH LITERACY

Pattern 1: Literacy used to create, discover, and affirm relationships to ancestors

Critical imagination, writes Jacqueline Jones Royster, is “the ability to see the possibility of certain experiences even if we cannot know the specificity of them [It is] a term for a commitment to making connections and seeing possibility” (83). Stephanie Flowers’s use of critical imagination illuminates other links between literacy and ancestry, such as the role of “creation” in forming, discovering, and affirming relationships to ancestors. In this, the first and most dominant of the four patterns of ancestorship developed through literacy, research participants employ a range of reading practices to create, discover, and affirm ancestors amid suppression of Black queer life and culture. By “creating” ancestors, I refer to the centrality of rhetorical invention in participants’ relation to ancestors. For some participants, the historical erasure of ancestors has meant having to create from nothing a narrative genealogy for their forebears wherein they relate to them. For others, creation comes into play by naming individuals as ancestors despite the lack of clear relevance to participants or of confirmed biographical details or shared investments. Participants used the words “discovering,” “locating,” and “identifying” interchangeably to reference their selection of or stumbling on ancestors through an already visible and predetermined group of Black queer ancestors. I argue that even location and identification of ancestors contains an element of creation, because assigning meanings to the ancestors’ identities—their life experiences, their writings, the historical moment, their connectivity—is already a practice of creation.

Flowers, who is a Black lesbian, was born in a small economically and racially diverse city on the east coast and currently resides in a large city in the south. Flowers easily recalled episodes like the moment she was introduced to the lives and works of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker through a Black lesbian college friend. This points to the role of school social networks outside of the classroom in creating connections to Black queer foremothers. Flowers’s relationship to an educational institution provided such social networks; however, Flowers’s experience also points to the failure of these same institutions, because the materials were not available in her own courses.

Flowers describes the link to her literacies, saying, “[r]eading was the only way I accessed [Parker and Lorde],” as she might otherwise not have encountered them. This detail highlights the authoritativeness of Black queer print culture in Flowers’s ability to draw from the legacy of struggle of Black lesbian ancestors to name and act on her own challenges. Recall also the anecdote from the

beginning of the article, in which Flowers says that Parker and Lorde's courageousness in refusing to be anything other than themselves taught her that she might as well do the same. Both women, she said, taught her that she was never meant to survive" so she might as well be herself, a direct quote from Lorde's poem "A Litany for Survival." This anecdote is then also an example of literacy helping to invoke the ancestor in the descendant's consciousness in a sort of dialogue, or call and response. In *Talkin and Testifyin*, Geneva Smitherman defines call and response as "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (104). Smitherman says call and response "seeks to synthesize speakers and listeners in a unified movement" (108). In my analysis of research participants' life stories, I have discovered that ancestor and descendant serve in the position of speaker and listener, respectively, creating the feeling of a dialogue across the generations. This is especially seen in cross-generational uses of literacy to respond to historical erasure, as well as to derive the community-building benefits of call and response: an expression of shared knowledge and purpose implicit to its practice.

Recalling the presence of ancestors, research participants often depended as much on the imagined life as they did on biographical information or published writing. Given the reality of historical erasure, such applications of imagination were important to individuals like Flowers, creating a biographical narrative for ancestors that drew her closer to them. Such application of critical imagination is a literacy practice in itself, as it requires research participants to read the historical times and social world in which the ancestor lived as a way to form plausible details for a background that has been erased, then formulate stories through which they as descendants are connected to those ancestors. For Flowers, a sense of shared identities and the mirroring of her oppression with Lorde and Parker authorizes her relationship to these ancestors. Further, Flowers also authorizes this relationship through the meaning she gives to details about their lives and from reading their writings. From that discernment, Flowers is also at work creating a sense of self that is connected to Parker and Lorde. No, Flowers does not know Parker or Lorde personally, but her ability to critically imagine strengthens her connection to them and also strengthens the formation of her own identity and the story of the self that she links to the narrative she creates about them. Only after this work does Flowers describe a sense of shared vision and struggle with her ancestors. These details point to the authority of the reader, and the authority of the reader response, to create, discover, and/or affirm relationships to ancestors. It also demonstrates the relationship between reading the stories of others and the tools it offers for authoring one's self, a more explicit example of which follows in the next pattern detailing what descendants do with the theories of the multiplicity of identities they draw from ancestors' lives and work.

Pattern 2: Ancestors model the multiplicity of identities as a category of rhetorical analysis

The lives and writing of ancestors model for descendants how and why to use multiplicity of identities as a lens for rhetorical analysis. Perhaps more fascinating is the stimulation of literacy

processes in the discovery and application of this lens, which engenders new ways of reading the social environments as well as new ways of thinking the self. Here we see how ancestors' writing provided a model or tool by which research participants could understand their lived experiences as Black LGBTQ people and the social world around them. Ancestors' writings and lives gave rise to the ways research participants could contextualize the social environments in which their identities were formed, including the desires, pain, connection, and isolation so prevalent in ancestors' writings and lives. In some ways, a consideration of these details always has to occur alongside, if not before, a thoughtful understanding or formation of an articulated identity. Discussing the ways literacy for social change affects the self, Gwen Gorzelsky notes that some literacies are "promoting individual self-revisions" that "can potentially contribute to social change" (214). "Multiplicity," a word I borrow from Michael Hames-Garcia, is one such way of reading the social and political experience that enhances the possibility of social change ("Who" 120) which in this article is achieving rootedness in the face of historical erasure. Elsewhere I use the phrase "multiplicity of identities" in reference to an idea of identities and oppressions as praxis, meaning both theory and practice, which recovers concepts of intersectionality that have been overlooked. Through multiplicity of identities, we see an analysis of identity as multiple, simultaneous, and intersectional alongside an analysis of oppression, discrimination, and social inequalities, which are also viewed as multiple, co-constitutive, and intersecting (Pritchard 2008a; 2008b).

Looking at both scholarly and day-to-day life, we can see the ways that the multiplicity of identities is actualized as practice. For example, the Combahee River Collective, a 1970s Black feminist organization, described identities and oppressions as being on different paths that sometimes intersect and overlap and at other times are synthesized or blended. I would argue that Combahee was offering both a theory of oppression *and* of identity. In *Identity Complex*, Hames-Garcia has rightly argued that many scholars treat intersectionality as a theory of oppressions eclipsing a focus and need for a theory of identities as "mutually constitutive" (xi). Indeed, in decades of scholarly discussions of Combahee's manifesto, identity and oppression are often treated exclusively of one another. My conception of multiplicity of identities seeks to unite the original work of Combahee and the subsequent critique offered by Hames-Garcia in subsequent decades. Through this multiplicity we can explore multiple oppressions and identities in ways that do not elide the specificity of difference, but that acknowledge the intertwining of these oppressions and identities along multiple axes of power and unearned privilege.

Phylicia Craig is a Black lesbian who was born in 1970 in the Midwest and now resides in a small east coast city. Craig described how learning about the role of Black gay and lesbian activists in the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement, particularly Bayard Rustin and Audre Lorde, provided her with insight into how homogenous ideas of Blackness silence Black queer contributions to history. These individuals modeled for Craig the need to disrupt historical erasure and processes for doing so by applying a multiplicity of identities.

While she was enrolled in a college civil rights history course called "History of African American

Leadership,” Craig noticed the absence of works by women in the list of course readings. In the syllabus for the course, however, was a footnote containing referrals for optional readings about Black women. Included on that list was the name Bayard Rustin, which Craig did not recognize. Craig thought it odd that Rustin, a man, was listed, and so she sought to learn as much about him as she could. Craig discovered Rustin’s role as lead organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a moment in civil rights history that was covered extensively in the course. Given Rustin’s pivotal role in the civil rights movement, Craig was very confused as to why he was not more heavily featured in the class, and she was doubly confused about why Rustin, a man, was excluded from course readings and discussions and relegated to the optional reading footnote when every other individual to be excluded in this way was female. Craig later learned that Rustin was gay. She believed that in the class Rustin “had only not been talked about because he was gay,” which piqued her curiosity about the exclusion of Black LGBTQ individuals from history. She became determined to disrupt the historical erasures and the silencing of Rustin’s story as a result of his gay identity.⁷

Reading works by or about Rustin and Lorde introduced Craig to the concept of a multiplicity of identities as a lens of intersectional analysis. She would later apply this lens to challenge historical frameworks and narratives that erase Black LGBTQ subjectivities by separating race from analyses of sexuality. A text Craig found especially instructive in this regard was Audre Lorde’s “Learning from the 60s,” from Lorde’s important collection titled *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Here Lorde writes, “The 60s for me was a time of promise and excitement, but the 60s was also a time of isolation and frustration from within” (137). Among the challenges was the societal resistance to her identity and personhood. Lorde writes “[a]s a Black lesbian mother in an interracial marriage, there was usually some part of me guaranteed to offend everybody’s comfortable prejudices of who I should be” (137). The confluence of race, gender, and sexual identity contributed to Lorde’s sense of isolation and frustration with the 1960s civil rights and women’s rights movements, and this same confluence threatened to silence Lorde and others, at that moment in history and in narrative. Lorde writes, “[t]hat is how I learned that if I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive” (137).

Refusing to deny any part of her identity, Lorde challenged the prejudice of monolithic identity by articulating a vision of radical politics built on a central premise: “[t]here is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (138). In this way, Lorde used her identities as Black, female, lesbian, and mother to present her struggle as much more complex than if it were based on only one identity, because people with multiple identity categories are undeniably a part of multiple groups. In terms of the Black freedom movement of the 1960s, and during the Black liberation struggle thereafter, Lorde says she learned an important lesson:

unity does not mean unanimity—Black people are not some standardly digestible quantity. In order to work together we do not have to become a mix of indistinguishable particles resembling a vat of homogenized chocolate milk. Unity implies the coming together of elements which are, to begin with, varied and diverse in their particular natures. (136)

Lorde's comments illustrate multiplicity of identities by resisting monolithic notions of Blackness that ignore diversity for the sake of flat ideas of unification. Additionally, in resisting monolithic notions of Blackness in history, Lorde's comments employ multiplicity of identities as a rhetorical tool in which to expose the practice of historical erasure that is a side effect of this limited and limiting view.

Lorde's modeling of multiplicity of identities in the setting of the 1960s provided Phylcia Craig with the framework to articulate how Rustin and other Black LGBTQ people were erased from that period in history. Craig credits Rustin and Lorde's work with modeling multiplicity of identities when describing her own life-fashioning:

Bayard Rustin and Audre Lorde. They brought the intersections and I didn't feel like they were checking stuff at the door when they were doing their work or what they wrote about . . . So, whereas in a lot of other circumstances it was either coming from the Black lens or it was only coming from the women's lens, or maybe from the LGBT lens, there was no intersections. . . . It made me feel whole, it made me feel complete, and I appreciate how they were able to articulate that, whereas I think I understood—I had those feelings, but I didn't know how to articulate it until I could see how they did. And it doesn't mean I have to read everything that they've read or they've written or wrote or did, but I felt like it gave me like, it really affirmed my existence. . . . [T]hey used writing as a way to deal with oppression and to confront it and I was very intrigued by that.

Craig's comments indicate how ancestors provided her with language to posit a different historiography of the civil rights movement than the one implicit in the syllabus, one in which the model of multiplicity of identities is applied to expose historical erasure and reconstruct narratives in which Black LGBTQ people are visible. Further, emphasizing reading as a rhetorical practice, ancestors' writing not only articulates shared identities but also gives rise to a language or way of reading the larger world and the oppressions contained therein. What this affirms is that historical erasure is not merely an issue of identity formation, but the result of real oppressive forces in action that individuals encounter, in which they must discern the available means (reading) to shape their sense of the larger world in which historical erasure takes place.

Print culture is important not just to ancestors modeling the multiplicity of identities but also to individual intervention by descendants like Craig. In the college class where she discovered Rustin, she proposed to write a paper about him, to use his story to speculate on what else from that period an application of multiplicity of identities might reveal about the history of civil rights in the United States. In this regard, Craig's connection to her ancestor models an application of multiplicity of identities in her own writing and analysis of history, culture, and politics. Craig was determined "to convince [the professor] that this was going to be a good project for me to work on because I needed to know more about this man." When she was given permission to complete the project, Craig explained that "writing that paper was like giving me new life—it was like pumping new blood in my veins." Rustin's and Lorde's life stories fostered Craig's life-fashioning, allowing her to use her

own reading and writing to push back against historical erasure. It is important to note that this engagement with Black queer ancestors provided Craig with the tools to form and affirm her identity as well; this will be more deeply examined in my analysis of the third pattern of ancestorship.

Consider also the story of Melissa Henderson, who identifies as a Black queer woman. She was born in 1983 in a small city in the Midwest and currently lives in a large city on the west coast. She remembered learning this critical lens through ancestors and applying it to an issue she deemed oppressive. Like Phylicia Craig, Henderson said reading Lorde's *Sister Outsider* was the first time she encountered a perspective on the social world that brought multiple categories of identity to bear, and all at once. This differs greatly from Henderson's critique of other lesbian texts. For instance, as a teen she recalled reading lesbian erotica, but all the books she found focused exclusively on White women:

I was very turned off by it I just remember not liking it. It's just like the words, the descriptions, like to read a sentence like her milky, White breasts, it just didn't resonate with me the same way that like the words from Black lesbian erotica resonated with me [I]t just felt right when I was reading the Black lesbian erotica it felt like beautiful, and almost wholesome, and I don't know, I really enjoyed it, and felt warm inside when reading it, and I don't mean because I was turned on. I just mean it felt good to read those words, as opposed to other erotica that I had read.

Henderson critiques lesbian erotica for representing lesbian sexuality exclusively through White characters, disregarding lesbian/queer women of color. In this regard, Henderson is calling out the limitations of those writings not only for a lack of treating identity as multiple and simultaneous but also for the ways this lack of recognition enables and operates as a form of oppression of the kinds of complex personhood that actually make up the social world. This type of writing assumes a single-variable framework for identity in which sexuality is emphasized, gender is emphasized, or perhaps even race is emphasized, but not the reality of one's living at the intersections of all three identities and experiences of oppression. For Henderson, Lorde's writings and the exclusions in lesbian erotica each prompted a rhetorically-oriented way of reading that illuminates and intervenes in this kind of erasure. Numerous writer-activists have echoed this critique of exclusion of Black lesbian literature in women's, lesbian, and African American literature and criticism more generally, including Jewell Gomez and Barbara Smith.⁸

Also, Henderson's assertion that reading Black lesbian erotica was more enjoyable and felt good confirms the awareness she had of multiplicity as a general reader of fiction. Reading erotica meant that Henderson was interested in reading a story about romantic or sexual encounters that gave attention to lesbian identity; however, her lived experience as an African-American is also a part of her ways of reading books and her social world. Thus, she brings to her reading of books, and indeed the world in which she lives, a concern about identities as intersectional and a desire to see that complexity reflected in her reading. Henderson's comments thus point toward the importance of multiplicity not only for how we theorize the role of identity in reading practices, but also for

writing about diversity of experiences, and in her particular case, lesbian experiences as depicted in erotic novels. As was the case with Phylicia Craig, Henderson's reading demonstrates the rhetorical dimension to her literacy practice in that her reading practices show more than the ways literacy mobilizes her identity formation, but that implicit to that practice is a dialectic and dialogic process through which she fashions her sense of the larger world in which her identity and critiques around the absence of diversity in lesbian erotica are both formed. Such work is crucial for uncovering or enabling a way of reading and writing people's lives that is ultimately affirming of the complexity of one's own identity and experience.

Pattern 3: Descendants' identity formation/affirmation is affected by an ancestors' writing and lives

Whereas pattern 2 emphasizes the ways ancestors' writing and lives inspired research participants to apply multiplicity of identities as a category of analysis, pattern 3 shows the role of those writings in the formation and affirmation of research participants' identities. One such individual, Michael Adkins, encountered his ancestors at a crossroads in his identity development as a Black gay man. Adkins was born in 1983 in a small town in the southwest and now lives in the southeast. He recalls that before and during his college career he had little opportunity to "read very many Black writers . . . let alone Black gay writers." During his junior year in college, an English professor assigned some of James Baldwin's work. Adkins described reading Baldwin as having a "significant" impact on his identity. He said,

I grew up and didn't have any problems being Black, but it always kind of annoyed me being 'Other' defined as a Black kid Being gay it's like damn that's certainly another 'Other' defining moment. I just very rarely saw the two [being Black and gay] intersect Coming out I was like, oh my God, I hope I'm not the only Black gay man on the Planet." Baldwin's sexuality was not the reason for his inclusion in the readings for the course, nor did the class discussion address it. Nevertheless, Adkins was intrigued by the themes of masculinity and homosexuality in the author's writing, so he followed up by paying close attention to them in his extracurricular reading and looking up more information about Baldwin and his work. Adkins said "learning about and reading Baldwin was very normalizing.

Adkins' anecdote describes another link between ancestry and literacy: the negotiation and affirmation of one's identities, which is a different act from pattern 2's focus on using the links between ancestry and literacy to form a lens through which individuals read the larger world. In this link the function of literacy is reflective of Min Zhan-Lu's observations about "critical affirmation as a trope for literacy" through which we "mark writing," and in the case of my study, reading, "as a site for reflecting on and revising one's sense of self, one's relations with others, and the conditions of one's life" (173). This practice is more intimately about research participant's own identity formation and affirmation, which is related to but different from considering the ways in which they understand the larger world in which those identities are actualized. For my research participants, this critical affirmation is realized in reading an ancestor's works, viewing photographs, or decoding

an ancestor's life in historical contexts, all of which promote access to models of life-fashioning and representations of Black queerness. As with all of humanity, these individuals are situated in multiple histories, cultures, and politics, leaving them to confront any number of dominant social forces when attempting to affirm all of their identities. Lacking immediate access to precedents for ways of being, knowing, making, and doing worsens this dilemma. Thus, ancestors illuminate paths for Black queers that historical erasure and silence have hidden or made inaccessible. Remember that neither the course nor the instructor embraced or facilitated Adkins's engagement with his Black queer forebears and his identity affirmation. Adkins's developing sense of self, as well as the incident of historical erasure he experienced, call forth forms of reading that make Black queerness more visible despite attempts to overlook it. This silence around Baldwin's sexuality or themes around queerness in Adkins' class is typical of the way that society ignores the specific lived experiences of queer students of color and of the intersections of racial, sexual, and gender identities in discussions of diversity and difference. Adkins's experiences, then, represent the numerous acts of othering that take place in classrooms every day. Such erasures are a silence around raced queerness that cut off the possibility of students like Adkins seeing some aspects of their own experience portrayed at all; and when they are portrayed, it is not in a multi-dimensional way but in one that is prone to stereotype and pathology. The consequences are detrimental to Black queer identity formation and affirmation.

Cicely Davis, a Black bisexual woman, was born in 1977 in a large city in the south. Davis first learned of Black lesbian and gay writers Audre Lorde and Essex Hemphill when she attended a reading group sponsored by a Black lesbian community organization. Davis said the work of Lorde, Hemphill, and other Black queer writers "impacted me hugely." Lorde's "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" discusses the intersections of identities and makes an argument for the celebration of difference (114-23). An essay titled "Loyalty" in Hemphill's collection *Ceremonies: Poetry and Prose* describes the complexities of negotiating multiple identities as Black and gay (69-71). In this essay, Hemphill confronts the notion that Blackness and gayness are disconnected in an individual's experience. He also argues against the notion that identity categories are so independent as to be disconnected in movements for justice and equality. This is an important perspective for someone like Cicely Davis, who was looking for ways to affirm the various aspects of her identity, particularly her race and bisexuality.

In "Loyalty," Hemphill discusses the plight of Black gay men who have been made invisible in the Black community because of heteronormative notions of Black gender and sexuality, saying "I speak for thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of men who live and die in the shadows of secrets, unable to speak of the love that helps them endure and contribute to their race" (70). These Black gay men are silenced, and "[t]heir ordinary kisses, stolen or shared behind facades of heroic achievement . . . are scrubbed away by the propaganda makers of the race . . . who would just as soon have us believe Black people can fly, rather than reveal that Black men have been longing to kiss one another, and have done so, for centuries" (70). Hemphill argues that this heteronormativity is nothing but "futile exercises in denial" (70). Rather than be run out of their communities for their

difference or acquiesce and conceal any aspect of their identities, Hemphill claims that Black queers “will not go away with our issues of sexuality. We are coming home” (70). Through this refusal, Black queers move to create community and a sense of identity outside of the oppressive boundaries of single variable notions of identity by embracing both their race and their sexuality.

While the focus of Hemphill’s “Loyalty” is Black gay men, his words model the ways anyone can embrace race and sexuality on one’s own terms. Davis applied this to her own specific circumstances as a Black bisexual woman. She spoke to the effects of Hemphill and Lorde’s work on the formation and affirmation of her identity:

because of their fearlessness, I felt empowered when I read their writings, and at the same time I had a responsibility, because most of them couldn’t be as ‘Out’ as I could be in this day and age . . . I can’t think of any better word but just empowerment from it. Just that they were so bold and so brave to write the way that they did when they did. And, that I was able to kind of reach back because both sides of my family thought it would be important to remember where we came from . . . And, we always have family reunions, and we’re always paying respect to the older people in the family when they’re still alive, and now that some of them are gone, it’s always been real important to me to remember my history. So, it was like, now that I can add these Black queer people to my forefathers and mothers is just like Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X and all the people I learned about growing up. And, now there’s like a whole body of queer people that were Black . . . [who] contributed to the life that I live today.

Although the setting in which Davis first discovered her Black LGBTQ ancestors and forebears—a Black lesbian discussion group—already hailed Black queerness, it is important to examine how Davis’s identity was formed and affirmed by her engaging with forebears through literacy. For instance, she states that the oppression her ancestors experienced issued her a mandate to be out, to be proud, and to represent all of her identities. Davis accessed ancestors’ descriptions of oppression to form and affirm her own sense of self, and in doing so she affirmed the role of literacy in that process. She uses the word “empowering” to describe this identity affirmation—the same word used by many other research participants when discussing the impact of ancestors on the formation of their identity.

It is also important to note that Davis first learned of Hemphill and Lorde through a community organization. This is significant, because it shifts the pedagogical scene away from the classroom, inviting us to imagine—just as we imagine identities as intertwined—the pedagogical possibilities of school and out-of-school spaces in tandem instead of mutually exclusive. Community organizations could help to identify resources about Black and other queer of color subjectivities, which may prove useful to instructors wishing to incorporate these matters into the classroom. In addition, Davis and the other participants in her group were adults. This emphasizes the significance of identity in adult literacy programs. By accessing Black queer history and culture, Davis’s reading group fostered an environment where critical literacies and identity formation and affirmation were successfully

intertwined for Black queer adults. These actions represent possibilities for pedagogical depth that teacher-scholars of literacy education—particularly teachers of adults—may not have imagined.

Pattern 4: Descendants receive cross-generational mandates to become ancestors through literacy

In “Learning from the 60s,” Audre Lorde writes, “Black people have been here before us and survived. We can read their lives like signposts on the road and find . . . that each one of us is here because somebody before us did something to make it possible. . . . We have the power those who came before us have given us, to move beyond the place where they were standing” (138, 144). Here Lorde talks about descendants finding power in knowing in the midst of “the hard work of becoming ourselves” (138), that our ancestors have blazed a trail for their descendants to follow. Whenever descendants recognize the path that has been created, Lorde says, we are drawing from our ancestors to “move beyond the place where they were standing” (144). Implicit in Lorde’s comments is the sense that, instead of honoring the ancestors simply by looking out for one’s self, one has a responsibility to leave behind tools of one’s own so that future generations may move beyond the place where they are currently standing. This sentiment of a sense of responsibility to those who follow was shared among research participants. As the following examples show, the role of literacy in hearing and acting on that responsibility is paramount.

Two powerful themes that were common across participants’ life stories were the sense of sharing a continuum of literate and rhetorical practices with ancestors and the concept of one’s own role as a future ancestor. Descendants see the uses of literacy in their own lives as mandates to be a source of power and knowledge for future generations of Black LGBTQ people, just as the ancestors’ life and works had been to them. Citing Robert Plant Armstrong, Ed Pavlic describes such cyclical relations as “syndesis,” which Armstrong uses “to account for the multidirectional relationship between ‘ancestors’ and ‘descendants’ in Yoruba ritual aesthetics” (21). Pavlic continues:

Armstrong describes cultural systems organized by aligning voices or rhythms in multiple layers of repeating cycles. “New” cultural performances explore various combinations of previous cycles and improvise changes in the existing patterns. This adds new patterns that continue to coexist with previous ones. The result is a multilayered ritual present that relates, through the consciousness of performers and audiences, to preexisting voices. Syndesis creates a fluid and dynamic relationship between repetition and variation, as well as between past and present. The interplay between repetition and variation situates the past emerging in the consciousness of participants in a fluid but structured milieu. (22)

Ancestors and descendants are linked through complex relations of shared and different identities; they occupy a continuum of consciousness invoked in and created by their communicative practices. Awareness can be triggered by the ancestor’s life, writings, or other symbolic representations that urge descendants to make meaning about and respond to the ancestor’s life and work. The descendants’ response to mandates from ancestors ranges from resisting present oppression and acting on their own fantasies to making life better for future generations of Black LGBTQ people

and leaving their own messages behind. I am reminded here of Mikhail Bakhtin's "chain of speech communion," a concept that describes transmissions of discourse as a "refraction of utterances, each one anticipating the next" (75-76). These utterances are "rejoinder[s] in dialogue that are oriented toward the response of the other (others), toward his active responsive understanding, which can assume various forms . . . the work is a link in the chain of speech communion . . . related to other work-utterances: both those to which it responds and those that respond to it" (76).

Yolanda Moore perfectly exemplifies the cross-generational cycle between ancestors and descendants. She claimed that the ancestors had a profound impact on her identity development, the articulation of her identities, and her literacy learning and practices. Her account was an important departure from those of other interviewees: while many participants detailed the role of literacy in inventing and engaging with ancestors, with Moore it was the ancestors who conditioned her literacy, indicating the ways her uses of literacy fit along a cross-generational continuum.

Moore is a Black lesbian who was born in a rural Southern town in 1958 and who currently resides in a large Southern city. She struggled to accept that she was a lesbian and then come out to her family and friends. She cited Bayard Rustin and Audre Lorde as chief among those who helped her during that time. As a member of the very active Black LGBTQ community in her city, she learned about Rustin and Lorde at two separate annual awards programs. At one event, Moore read a program with information about Rustin, whom she claims was the first Black LGBTQ person she had ever read about. After attending an awards program for Lorde, Moore began reading everything she could find that was written by or about her or her work:

This immediately empowered me about 50,000%. I mean it was so self-affirming . . . I mean this sister was a trailblazer. We're talking about, you know, in the 1950s, you know, when there was much, much, much homophobia going on . . . in the 1950s, in the midst of all the racial issues that were going on and all the external stuff that she had to deal with. Certainly then there's room for me and acceptance for who I am. So, it was really affirming for me to read about her and to understand that, you know, the struggle does continue and it's incumbent upon me to be the best broadcaster that I can, you know. It's kind of like an honor for me to even identify with her as an activist, as a warrior, as a mother, as a wife. She was just all that! And so it was very empowering for me.

Through her assertion that "the struggle does continue and it's incumbent upon me to be the best broadcaster that I can," Moore identifies the mandate that she spread the knowledge she has received so that she might also alert and empower others. She calls attention to the cyclical nature of the ancestor-descendant relationship, whereby the descendant's responsiveness to the ancestor entails making accessible to future generations the knowledge of their heritage. Moore reflected:

The writing reminds me that those who have come before me, I have their blessings, and it's a true testament and an honor to them that those that come after them identify so closely with their struggle . . . I see it as part of the way I am, and that whatever struggles that I must endure, that it somehow makes it easier for the next sisters who come along, you

know, that I've been in corporate America for a significant part of my life, so when the next young woman comes along . . . perhaps her journey won't be as strenuous as mine was because, you know, Mr. Corporate America has seen a lesbian and understands that, you know, she's competent; she's capable; she's professional, and so perhaps the next young woman won't have to, you know, reinvent the wheel for these people. It's kind of hard to see. The generational legacy they would need to free, untangle that, and hopefully, it will be a little bit better for the next sister who comes along that identifies in the same way that I did.

To Moore, the work of the ancestors aided her own struggle, and she is grateful to them for making her life better. She describes her continuation of their work as an honor and a duty that the ancestors have bestowed on her generation of Black LGBTQ people. For example, as an expression of that gratitude that further shows the role of literacy, Moore has worked as an active leader in

“Relationships between literacy, ancestors, and the relics of history are central to what we may consider culturally relevant teaching.”

a community writing group and book club in which she shares her own work and exposes other Black lesbian, bisexual, and queer women to these same works by which she has been touched. Here she reveals her awareness of and responsibility to her own descendants, those who may invoke her and

her accomplishments just as she did with Rustin and Lorde. In doing this work, Moore has been especially able to serve as a mentor to many of the younger women who have joined the group, a relationship that helps her to inspire someone else in the ways that the ancestors have inspired her. A primary lesson she imparts to these women is that they too must pay their thanks to her in the form of connecting someone else to the ancestors and to the community. As such, Moore is acting on the continuum in both her own work and also in inspiring the next generation of Black lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in her writing and reading groups to do the same. Overall, Moore's comments and actions exemplify putting critical imagination to use to promote the positive effects of a cross-generational continuum through reading and writing to form connections to ancestors and to the future in the face of historical erasure.

CONCLUSION

Literacy is central to establishing one's links to a historical precedent, creating a framework that embraces a multiplicity of identities to form and affirm those identities. These historical precedents were most often manifested in the form of an ancestor. Given the adverse effects of historical erasure, the interventions described by my interviewees enact a form of personal and social change. One implication of this article pertains to the role of ancestorship in the future of literacy and composition pedagogy. I was intrigued to learn that not only are ancestors ambassadors of literacy for survival and resistance, but ancestors' relationships to descendants could be characterized by and stimulate

specific literacy activities. As researchers and teachers of human communication (most broadly defined), we are responsible for maintaining focus on what Gloria Ladson-Billings called *culturally relevant pedagogy*: the theory and praxis of teaching grounded in the social, political, cultural, and historical registers and resonances with students (Ladson-Billings). Still, as Timothy Barnett notes, far too many “critical pedagogues do address the links between the personal and social critique but fail to fully explore a critical pedagogy tied to personal experience” (356). Barnett argues, and I concur, that, “readers (and writers, I argue) need intense emotional involvement in their reading if they are to use texts to reconstruct themselves as critical subjects” (357).

My analysis of ancestorship developed through literacy points toward one potential area to further tie literacy and composition to personal experience, while also using the deeply emotional resonances students may have with historical erasure and intervention into such practices as a starting point on which to draft new lessons, assignments, peer-talk about writing, and students’ trying on various positions from which to engage in social, political, and cultural critique. Relationships between literacy, ancestors, and the relics of history are central to what we may consider culturally relevant teaching. These relationships are central because they provide the technologies or tools by which teachers may engage their students in a more relevant and efficient way, essentially meeting students where they are. Accepting this point, we are also called as scholar-teachers, and may share with our students, the impulse to resist attempts to classify the cultural centrality of ancestors as “discredited knowledge,” for such attempts are bound up in and amplify dismissive attitudes toward a particular community’s culturally situated knowledge (Morrison 342). In this article, discredited knowledge includes the discrediting of ancestor knowledge as specific form of historical erasure, as well as the overlooked histories and cultural practices that are disappeared in the fissures created by the separation of blackness and queerness. Instead, instances of so-called superstition and magic must be seen as yet “another way of knowing things” that is “enhancing, not limiting” (Morrison 342). Some ways to meet this goal include reinstating the centrality of ancestry as germane to discourses of cultural relevance in classrooms and reimagining what this could mean for assignments and student mentoring. It also opens doors to new hermeneutics that acknowledge and resist the consequences of historical literacy learning and practices, as well as the culturally specific values and assumptions communities have about literacy.

Another implication of my findings on curricula is that ancestors are not manifested in literacy practices for everyone in the same way, if at all, even though the focus of this study was research participants who are able to appeal to literacy and written texts in order to connect with ancestors (as described by the four patterns of Black queer ancestorship developed through literacy). However—and not to diminish the weight of my results—I hope that my analysis will inspire creative and generative discussions about the pedagogical strategies that might be employed regarding those for whom ancestorship is not relevant. In short, historical erasure is harmful. In general, it is imperative to mine various conceptions of historical erasure and ancestorship to determine the unique relationships that different communities have with history and the ways those relationships hinder

or strengthen reading, writing, and other areas of communicative growth, especially in relationship to identity formation and affirmation. For my own part, my larger study places more emphasis on examining historical rootedness among individuals who have no relationships with print texts or formal educational institutions and among those who remain excluded from queer communities—namely, transgender people—who often have to search elsewhere for ancestors who reflect their own lived experiences. These nuances deepen the claims I make in this article, and they also address aspects of ancestorship that require even greater attention to the complexity of intersectionality that connects Black LGBTQ identity more deliberately to class, educational background, age, or region.

My use of identity theory offers additional implications for literacy and composition studies. In particular, by examining race with sexuality, I apply intersectional and queer-of-color theories to promote a conversation within literacy and composition studies. Scholars of literacy, composition, and rhetoric have employed the conceptual lens of intersectionality in their research, especially concerning Black feminist literacy and rhetorical studies.⁹ This concept of intersectionality differs greatly from those theories that examine “identity myopia” (Wallace 521), which views identities as flattened, mutually exclusive categories. Identity myopia applied to Black and LGBTQ identities helps to explain the historical erasure of Black LGBTQ people. An effect of this identity myopia on literacy and composition theory, then, has been the development of theories of race and queerness that exclude one another. That is, with very rare exceptions, critical race and LGBTQ theoretical and pedagogical perspectives in literacy and composition studies have not been linked in the scholarly discourse of composition and rhetoric in a sustained way. As a result, very little research in literacy, composition, and rhetorical studies has been published about LGBTQ people of color. For my part, the larger study from which this article is drawn will be the first book-length study in the field to focus exclusively on Black LGBTQ people's literacy and rhetorical practices, joining the scholarly discourses of African American and LGBTQ literacy and rhetoric in a sustained theoretical, historical, and pedagogical analysis.

Detailing major shifts in the use and disregard of queer theory in composition studies, Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace write that the “transformative power” of queerness “may be even more powerful when considered together with important axes of identity, such as gender, race, class, physical and mental/emotional abledness, spirituality, and age” (301). As it stands, despite critical, intellectual discussions of queerness in composition studies, there is a dearth of scholarship theorizing queerness in relationship to the other “axes of identity.” Consequently, there is a dearth of published scholarship examining the convergence of race and sexuality. Two exceptions in the field of composition and rhetoric are Harriet Malinowitz's study (1995) of lesbian and gay student writers, which devotes two chapters of case study on a Black gay man and Latina lesbian, as well as Gwendolyn Pough's study (2004), which gives some attention to the politics of Black queer sexualities in the cultural productions (music videos, memoir, rap lyricism) of Black women in hip hop. Still, the limited amount of attention to LGBTQ people of color in composition and rhetoric is surprising for a number of reasons. First, there has been significant opposition to queer theories that

ignore race, including by white queer theorists who have asserted the value of a critique of race in queer theories; regardless, this has not become the trajectory in studies of composition and rhetoric. Second, as stated earlier, scholars in the field already employ intersectionality and other theories of complex personhood. These two points should promote literacy and rhetoric examinations that are centered on complex identity theories. My analysis of how identity myopia produces historical erasure (see pattern #3) is an example of an examination of the intersection of race and sexuality; such intersections, including of Blackness and queerness, should be examined further in relation to literacy, composition, and rhetoric.

That ancestors have been vital to the learning, meaning, and use of literacy by my research participants emphasizes that ancestry is an important feature of Black queer literacy traditions. This study speaks to, and yet challenges, the body of scholarship that has examined the roles of intellectual and cultural heritage on literacy learning and practice. My findings encourage further exploration of the roles of ancestors and other potentially overlooked artifacts of cultural heritage in literacy in other communities, especially those communities where ancestors and elders occupy positions of prominence. If we are willing to listen, the voices of ancestors will engage us in discussions about where we have been, where we are, and where we might go.¹⁰

NOTES

¹ I use pseudonyms for names and locations throughout the study to protect the confidentiality of research participants. Following the model of Kath Weston, and further employed by Mignon Moore, I provide each participant a last name to indicate an adulthood and a social status that people of color, LGBTQ folks, and other marginalized populations are often denied.

² A more detailed discussion of life-fashioning appears in my larger study.

³ All interviews explored the topics below, yielding the four patterns of ancestorship I theorize in this article:

Identity

Memories and other significant events in the coming out process.

Persons associated with coming out process.

Influential Black or LGBTQ people.

Role of friendship and family to your Black LGBTQ identity.

Literacy

Memories of writing/reading associated with race and sexuality.

Memories of writing/reading during coming out process.

People associated with writing/reading.

Types of writing/reading shared and public.

Types of writing/reading private.

Reading and Writing Today

Motivations for reading/writing.

Consequences for reading/writing.

⁴ See Charmaz; Glaser and Strauss; and Strauss and Corbin.

⁵ Scholars in many fields and disciplines, especially historians, recognize that there are whole histories of groups that remain relatively unknown and remain erased from the dominant historical narratives. I would argue that this historical erasure always implicates the use of literacy in that it is through acts of (mis)reading and (mis)writing that such omissions occur. Literacy studies is uniquely positioned to recognize and address these historical erasures, as well as provide a nuanced analysis of the various ways literacy is used to interrupt historical erasure too.

⁶ See Creel; Kopytoff; Stuckey; and Thompson.

⁷ See film by Kates and Singer. See also D'Emilio.

⁸ See Gomez, "Cultural" and "Some." See also Smith.

⁹ See Logan; Comfort; Royster; Richardson; and Pough.

¹⁰ I would like to thank Susan Zaeske, Catherine Prendergast, Deborah Brandt, Craig Werner, the LiCS editorial team and the anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Jonathan, and David Wallace. "The Queer Turn in Composition Studies: Reviewing and Assessing an Emerging Scholarship." *College Composition and Communication* 61.1 (2009): 300-20. Print.
- Armstrong, Robert Plant. *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth and Affecting Presence*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1981. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1986. Print.
- Barnett, Timothy. "Politicizing the Personal: Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and Some Thoughts on the Limits of Critical Literacy" *College English* 68.4 (2006): 356-81. Print.
- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*. Dirs. Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer. California Newsreel, 2002. Film.
- Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. New York: Sage, 2006. Print.
- Comfort, Juanita Rogers. "Becoming a Writerly Self: College Writers Engaging Black Feminist Essays." *College Composition and Communication* 51.4 (2000): 540-59. Print.
- Creel, Margaret W. *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs*. New York: New York UP, 1988. Print. American Social Experience.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991): 1241-99. Print.
- D'Emilio, John. *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*. New York: Free Press, 2003. Print.
- Fairley, Nancy J. "Dreaming Ancestors in Eastern Carolina." *Journal of Black Studies* 33.5 (2003): 545-61. Print.
- Glaser, Barney G. *Emergence vs. Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*. Mill Valley: Sociology P, 1992. Print.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: de Gruyter, 1967. Print.
- Gomez, Jewelle. "A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbians in Fiction by Women." *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Ed. Barbara Smith. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color P, 1983. 110-23. Print.
- . "But Some of Us Are Brave Lesbians: The Absence of Black Lesbian Fiction." *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 289-97. Print.
- Gorzelsky, Gwen. *The Language of Experience: Literate Practices and Social Change*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2005. Print. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.
- Graff, Harvey. "The Legacies of Literacy Studies." *Literacy in Composition Studies* 1.1 (2013): 15-17. Print.

- Hames-Garcia, Michael R. "Who Are Our Own People?": Challenges for a Theory of Social Identity." *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Eds. Paula M.L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000. 102-29. Print.
- . *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011. Print.
- Hemphill, Essex. "Loyalty." *Ceremonies: Poetry and Prose*. San Francisco, CA: Cleis P, 1992. Rpt. 2000. 69-71. Print.
- Johnson, E. Patrick, and Mae G. Henderson. "Introduction: Queer Black Studies/'Quaring' Queer Studies." *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 1-17. Print.
- Kopytoff, Igor. "Ancestors as Elders in Africa." *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation*. 2nd ed. Eds. Roy Richard Grinker and Christopher B. Steiner. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. 412-21. Print. Global Perspectives.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994. Print.
- Logan, Shirley Wilson. "We Are Coming": *The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999. Print.
- Lorde, Audre. *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*. Freedom: Crossing P, 1982. Print.
- . "Learning from the 60s." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom: Crossing P, 1984. 134-44. Print.
- . "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom: Crossing P, 1984. 114-23. Print.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation." *College Composition and Communication* 51.2 (1999): 172-94. Print.
- Malinowitz, Harriet. *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995. Print.
- Moore, Mignon R. "Lipstick or Timbalands? Meanings of Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32.1 (2006): 113-39. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Mari Evans. Garden City: Anchor P/Doubleday, 1984. 339-45. Print.
- Parker, Pat. *Movement in Black*. Expanded ed. Ithaca: Firebrand, 1999. Print.
- Pavlić, Edward M. *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African American Literary Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002. Print.
- Pough, Gwendolyn. *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture and the Public Sphere*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2004. Print.
- Powell, Malea. "Listening to Ghosts: An Alternative (Non) Argument." Eds. Christopher Schroeder, Helen Fox, and Patricia Bizzell. *ALT Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2002. 11-22. Print.
- Pritchard, Eric Darnell. "A Litany for Survival': Black Queer Literacies." Diss. University of

Wisconsin-Madison, 2008a.

- . "Pathways to Diversity: Social Justice and the Multiplicity of Identities" CCCC: Conversation on Diversity. CCCC, 4 Dec 2008b. Web.
- Richardson, Elaine. *African American Literacies*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004. Print.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones. *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change among African American Women*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2000. Print. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.
- Smith, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Eds. Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1982. 157-75. Print.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1977. Print.
- Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet M. Corbin. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998. Print.
- Stuckey, Sterling. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987. Print.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. "Kongo Influences in African American Artistic Culture." *Africanisms in American Culture*. Ed. Joseph E. Holloway. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 148-84. Print.
- Villanueva, Victor. "Cuentos de mi Historia: An Art of Memory." *Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing*. Eds. Deborah H. Holdstein and David Bleich. Logan: Utah State UP, 2001. 267-76. Print.
- Wallace, David L. "Transcending Normativity: Difference Issues in College English." *College English* 68.5 (2006): 502-30. Print.
- Weston, Kath. "Fieldwork in Lesbian and Gay Communities." *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader in Theory and Practice*. Eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy New York: Oxford UP, 2004. 177-184. Print.