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**Facing the horror of uncertainty: using female slashers as a model for thinking about and practicing English Literature and Composition**

Rose Hall

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Facing the Horror of Uncertainty: Using Female Slashers as a Model for Thinking About and  
Practicing English Literature and Composition

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

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By

Rose Hall

Fall 2020

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## Introduction

“What is that?” followed by an awkward laugh. That is the most common reaction I receive whenever I tell my colleagues that I am designing an English course around female slashers. Simply put, they are women who like to cut people with sharp objects, but they do not sacrifice their femininity to do so. Female slashers share the urge to slash with film creepers like Michael Myers, Freddy Kruger, and Norman Bates, but these women do not share the classic slasher’s threatening appearance, outcast status, or inhuman strength and durability. Female slashers are likable, beautiful, sexual, and vulnerable while maintaining their power. By making these women the center of attention, my class pushes students to sharpen more than their reading and writing skills. It is a course where the class’s primary goal is not just to resist binary thinking but to cut it and create a gash that allows students to see every side, every layer, and every angle simultaneously. Women are not easily defined, even in seemingly simplistic movie genres. This class’s goal is not “to turn the devils of female representation into angels” (Mehls 20). It shows women as the complex, contradictory, ever-changing beings that they are, and provides a forceful feminine model for English students. Studying female slashers hacks through the canon and disciplinary lines. Students learn that literature is more than classic novels; it is modern novels, television, movies, and people. And composition is more than writing papers; it is creating dollhouses, carving into flesh, and committing murder. My students are challenged not just to study female slashers but to be female slashers.

When studying the novels of the class, Oyinkan Braithwaite’s *My Sister the Serial Killer* (*MSTSK*) and Gillian Flynn’s *Sharp Objects*, I ask students to cut into a text, embrace murder as composition, come to terms with the consequences and limits of their work, accept their

vulnerability, and embrace their power to change reality. I slice the class into three sections: how to read like a female slasher, compose like a female slasher, and write from their bodies like a female slasher. While I push them to approach our field in the same fashion as a female slasher approaches slashing, it should be noted that I do not encourage anyone to harm themselves or anyone else. However, I ask them to recognize the kind of intellectual violence that literature and composition studies flourish in and ask them to see that the texts they read and produce are more consequential than they realize.

In horror, slashers have been famous for portraying women as victims and survivors ever since Carol J. Clover coined the term the “Final Girl,” so much so that “female slasher” sounds to many like an oxymoron. It is common for teachers to begin the quarter with a brainstorming session. Most of the time, students are surprised by how much they already know, especially when it comes to pop culture. However, on the first day of my female slashers class, not a single student could name more than one famous female slasher or serial killer. Most were stuck at Lizzie Borden and Bloody Mary, while others were still shocked that I asked them to name notorious women killers in the first place. Allan Nail, for example, stated after brainstorming with his class that, “By the end of the day, it was evident to the students that however unlikely it seemed, knowledge of the undead was a part of the culture we shared without (necessarily) learning it directly” (Allan 50). Some of Nail’s students even confessed that they were completely aware of a zombie’s nature without ever seeing a zombie film. When students are more conceptually comfortable with the specifics of a zombie apocalypse than they are with a woman wielding a knife to kill rather than cook, there is a clear gap in our humanities studies. Most still view women through a limited scope, reinforced by classes centered around traditional work.

Throughout undergraduate and graduate school, I have studied many canonical pieces of literature that feature men lynching, raping, and committing other heinous acts of brutality—Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*— and no one questions their place in the class because violence against women is normalized in the cannon that most professors teach. To be clear, I am not suggesting censorship or the removal of literature that features violence against women but advocating for the addition of literature with a different perspective on women. White cis males that dominate the literature and scholarship in both literary and composition studies are rarely, if ever, in a position where they are exposed, vulnerable, violated, or weak. Literature by women writing about their trauma in some ways still reinforces men as powerful definers, violators, and reality makers. Women face a history of physical abuse and intellectual scrutiny. Since they first picked up a book or pen, society has questioned them: “Will reading get them into trouble? Can we trust them as writers?” Women are victims or survivors, and audiences have a difficult time seeing them as anything else. There is a pressing need to study women from a female slasher’s perspective if we wish to continue closing the gap between men and women.

This class asks students to identify with this assertively “female” perspective because there is a history that codes women in a position of submissive obedience, and the female slashers we study do not let that demeaning history keep them from acting aggressively, taking that power into their own hands no matter how uncertain or wrong it may feel. Most students, especially first-years, do not identify with the untouchable white men who dominate the field. I remember when I first got to college, I felt like anything I said in the class was going to be wrong or quickly invalidated. My status as a woman and a person of color made me feel like I could not disagree with the class’s booming white voices. bell hooks describes a similar

experience, “During college, the primary lesson was reinforced: we were to learn obedience to authority” (4). Generally, students do not feel powerful, smart, or worthy of being heard.

Whether a student is searching for the meaning of a text or trying to communicate that meaning to others, they face pressure to obey by saying only that which keeps white men in power.

Studying female slashers and using them as models gives students the confidence to transgress when they feel like they cannot because society tells them not to.

“What is a female slasher?” is only the first of many questions that followed my curriculum’s development. Confusion is the overwhelming emotion I have encountered from peers, colleagues, students, and myself while taking on this project. That confusion manifested itself within various questions: Is this just an excuse to teach something you like? Is this a literature class or a composition class? Why horror as a theme and such a specific brand of horror? What could students possibly learn from glorifying and imitating violent women? One colleague even suggested that it may look like I am teaching young adults to murder in the name of feminism. After two quarters of teaching this peculiar, somewhat deviant class, I finally found some clarity and will attempt to answer these questions throughout this introduction and the rest of my paper.

The class’s conception was gradual. I did not wake up one day with the sudden urge to walk into a classroom and start talking about women with a desire to tear at flesh. Wes Craven’s *Scream* movies first kindled my intrigue. In my senior year of undergraduate school, an incredibly open-minded professor teaching an American horror literature seminar let me use the skills I would typically take to the pages of Poe, Lovecraft, or Henry James and apply them to *Scream*. My final paper in that seminar invited me to explore the *Scream* movies with an academic mindset, unsealing the complicated relationship slasher films have with gender.

Honestly, I did create this class because I harbor a deep interest in the twisted style of slasher films, but that interest is part of the reason it is a valuable subject for me to teach. As Carla Arnell notes, in any literature classroom, “a disposition of delight is no less important [than careful planning] for teaching literature well” (2). Arnell argues that the teacher’s demeanor toward a text is the key to inspiring students to engage with literature fully and to use it to reflect on their values, experiences, and future lives. Thus, the excitement I take in discussing this material makes it a more engaging curriculum. Teaching this class has shown me the merit in Arnell’s argument. Students are willing to invest more thought and effort if their instructors are eager to do the same.

Even without my interest, horror has a way of keeping students engaged. One particularly useful quality is its ability to be immersive, serving feminist critics’ goals to position the body in academia. By immersive, I mean that horror is one of the most phenomenologically inclined genres. Horror has the unique ability to inspire strong physical responses in viewers: increased heart rates, dry mouths, and in some cases, spasms of fear. There is something about fear that makes students’ bodies and minds more susceptible to the material. As Harrison notes, “Something about macabre events truly captivates us,” listing one of the possible reasons for the attention students give as an evolved survival instinct because “it is adaptive to pay close attention to that which can harm us or even kill us” (11). The subject material helps satisfy bell hooks and Audre Lorde’s urgency for the body, engagement, and theory to meet<sup>1</sup>. Studying horror allows students to embody the material, which undisputedly makes them more engaged. They give closer readings, come up with more nuanced arguments, and connect to the material

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<sup>1</sup> See Margaret Kissam Morris’s “Audre Lorde: Textual Authority and the Embodied Self” and bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*, especially chapters one, five, and thirteen.

more intimately physically experiencing the text. Teaching this class, I have found that even the most skeptical and disengaged students find it difficult to put down the novel or look away from the screen once they have started.

Horror's main contribution to the class is its unmatched value as a theoretical framework for thinking about the connection between composition and literature. There have been many teachers that use pop culture as the center of their classrooms, using everything from reality television to zombie literature, such as Gold (2018) who uses *The Bachelor* to teach a feminist composition class, Duncum (2009) who argues the pop culture should give rise to a transgressive and, above all, fun pedagogical style, Hughes (2009) who uses a variety of "monsters" like vampires, slashers, and zombies to fuse pop culture, literature, and composition in order to study the anxieties of a given society. However, none of these topics provide such clear language to understand the complicated relationship between literature and composition as the slasher genre. John Briggs tracts the political disagreements between composition and literature over five generations (3). The extreme side of the debate exposes composition and literary studies' fear for survival, viewing each other as the source of their demise as a discipline. Slashers provide a meta-conceptual framework for thinking about the rivalry detailed by Briggs.

Their relationship viewed through a slasher's lens is consistent with Laurie Strode and Michael Myers' sibling rivalry. Laurie Strode is the Final Girl in most of the *Halloween* movies, starting with Debrah Hill's 1978 *Halloween*, while Michael is the slasher in all of them. It is revealed in *Halloween II* that Laurie and Michael are brother and sister. Composition as a field is Laurie Strode, and literature is Michael. Literature is the slasher because it is categorized as the aggressive force in academic discourse: "First, either [composition studies] must escape the strangulating domination of literary studies, or it must establish knowledge-making parity with

literary studies in English departments” (Hansen 236). “Strangling domination” denotes literature’s potential to kill composition. Composition fights to get away from Literature, treating it like a matter of survival like Laurie Strode fights to get away from Michael. Conceptual closeness is just threatening to Laurie as it is to composition. She denies her familial connection to Michael, refusing to speak about it and changing her name in *Halloween H20*. The 2018 reboot even helps Laurie try to erase her family ties to Michael by having Laurie’s granddaughter discard the information as a rumor “some people made up to make them feel better” (00:17:04-00:17:11). This resistance to claim their entangled origin is not unlike the discourse surrounding the history of literature and composition studies as Melissa Ianetta describes it: “such silence [between literature and composition studies] results from a disconnect originating in our disciplinary histories, where the history of one discipline—either writing or literary study—is only told at the expense of the other, and where we define our future through a reading of the past that neglects the literature-writing connection” (55-56). Admitting relation suggests a loss in identity. Thus, the two fields refuse to acknowledge each other inside their classrooms as much as possible.

The most significant connection one should make when using the sibling relationship between slasher and Final Girl to read the tension between literature and composition is their like-mindedness. As Carol J. Clover points out, the Final Girl is “boyish” and “her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself” (40). Laurie becomes a killer like Michael Myers to defeat him, even wielding Myers’ weapon against him and decapitating an innocent man in *Halloween H20*. By the 2018 movie, Laurie’s evolution has made her entirely obsessed with killing her slasher

brother, transforming her house into a giant death trap. The Final Girl and slasher are opponents. It makes sense for them to be opposites like most good and evil figures in movies, but the qualities they share become their most dominant features.

The distinction between literature and composition in its purest form is reading vs. writing. Still, I have never been in a literature class where we did not write about something we read or a composition class where we did not read something before writing. If writing and reading are murder, literature and composition both kill, but like Laurie Strode and Michael Myers, they murder for different reasons. When they kill, people perceive their actions differently. Laurie kills to survive, and Michael survives to kill. They are as similar as they are different, just as composition and literature are. The two English fields are locked in an obsessive family feud, consumed with the idea that they threaten each other's survival, as they teeter endlessly between near-death and resurrection.

This constant struggle between the Final Girl and the slasher carries on within the female slasher. The female slashers are emphatically feminine, beautiful, and functional, embracing their gender and sexuality as strengths. However, they also hunt, torture, repurpose human flesh, and harbor many dysfunctional thoughts. They are both aggressors and victims, popular and outsiders. They share the Final Girl's ability to survive and the slasher's ability to murder. Just as the spar between the Final Girl and the slasher goes on within the female slasher, literature and composition are deadlocked within my class.

Fellow teachers asked me to consider where the boundary lies and how I would make sure that neither crossed too far over the line that separates them. The anxiety composition and literature scholars have over survival makes them feel like they need to create strict, clean barriers defining the two, but that ignores the complicated gray area where writing becomes a

part of the reading process and reading becomes a part of the writing process. While there is undoubtedly a use for categorizing the skills of literature and composition separately when students first enter college and again later as students are mastering their disciplines, in my class, the murder of the boundary that separates the two fields is unavoidable and central. While there was some discussion, I did not push my students to define them as two distinct English fields forcefully. I allowed them to keep struggling against and with each other, making horror my main priority because by leaning into fear, working through it and making it productive, one can find connections and explore dark cavities of meaning they never thought they were capable of knowing.

People are uncomfortable with my class because it is horrifying not just in content but in practice. Studies like this are horrific because they “specialize in formlessness, incompleteness, categorical interstitiality and categorical contradictoriness” (Carroll 55). However, horror is essential for students to meet the bigger picture goals of literature and composition. It is distortion. It changes the familiar into the strange, transforms the known into the unknown, and confuses everything. The level of uncertainty that horror establishes leads to questions and innovative answers. When students allow themselves to travel down the dark, twisting path of confusion, they “ponder the big, unmasterable ideas literature raises — the perennial questions that confront all human beings, no matter their time and place” (Arnell 5). When students question reality, they use rhetorical composition “not as a matter of giving effectiveness to truth but of creating truth” (Scott 408). For certainty in an “immutable changeless” truth erases the need for rhetorical composition altogether (405). The chaotic uncertainty that horror brings are not to be shunned but to be embraced. Literature and composition need to be allowed to collaborate and produce together while remaining in a difficult struggle in the same classroom. If

one is not stopped by the anxiety that comes with recognizing that the two branches of English are connected and distinct, one can bring both of their skills together to attack a problem, such as I will demonstrate in this class. As the Final Girl and slasher evolved to struggle within the female slasher—who absorbs both their strengths, literature and composition should do the same within an English class. For this reason, I will call students English students rather than composition or literature students.

Because horror is a dominating presence in my class, some colleagues have expressed concerns about my students' wellbeing. They are worried how studying the stories of violent and abused women will affect my students. Admittedly, there were times where the material led to difficult discussions and confessions, but I have experienced these sensitive interactions in my teaching experience before without any emphatically horrific texts embedded in the curriculum. Marciniak reflects on this kind of anxiety pedagogy after teaching a class covering the 1996 film *Calling the Ghosts*. Marciniak discovers the conversation, thoughts, and feelings that manifest in the classroom cannot always be controlled (889). There is no predicting what will trigger a student's need to ask for help or speak about their trauma. "Classrooms are inherently risky already" (890). It is never an easy or expected situation where a student confides to a teacher that they carry around trauma. Still, these situations should not stop a class from tackling ethically troubling and morally gray areas one encounters in horror. If anything, the nature of horror to break down boundaries deserves more credit for unlocking the lips of students who need more help than they are letting on. Trauma-informed pedagogy should create an "emerging community" where students feel seen and heard by the class (Sitler 121). I cannot control how my students will react to a text, but I make it a priority to be aware and available when they need to talk.

The key to being supportive of students affected by trauma is mindfulness and transparency. I do not take my colleagues' concerns about student well-being lightly. I recognize that most of my students are young first-years. I once even had a sensitive student jump out of their chair while showing the 2009 film *The Uninvited*. When confronted with horror, the "threat is compounded by revulsion, nausea, and disgust" (Carroll 53). Even though my curriculum is mostly focused on fiction, Carroll explains that these emotions are still in effect because of "Thought Theory," where one is affected by the thought of the horrific threat rather than the fictional existence of it (56). At the same time, Bantinaki argues that experiencing these feelings are sometimes beneficial: "Through voluntary encounters with gross stimuli (that children again compulsively pursue), we can learn to manage our reactions to disgust, or (through desensitization) increase our tolerance over such stimuli, or just ease the negative hold that they have on us in real life" (Bantinaki 390). For me, the key term is "voluntary." It is important to consider how the positive and negative ways horror can affect students who are easily triggered because of trauma, but it is just as crucial to make sure students are willing to study slasher texts. On the first day of class, I am fully transparent about what my students will face from the texts: murder, rape, self-harm, and verbal violence. I would be lying if I said I do not sometimes lose students because they found my material too troublesome after the first day. However, most students choose to stick it out and are surprised by how much they enjoy the class. I am equally pleased with the amount of fun we can have even though, at times, the course is heavy with solemn subjects. The female slasher curriculum provides as many opportunities for amusing thrills as it does for emotional challenges.

Not all my colleagues' concerns are about the students troubled by the material. Some question how it will affect students who are enthralled by violence and the female slashers'

peculiarities. They worry that my class is only about how “cool” violent women are. Camille, the protagonist in *Sharp Objects*, is especially graphic in her narration, and she has an addiction to cutting words into herself. I can see how some may feel that my means of turning female slashers’ violence into a learning material and a model for students is glorifying violence, but horror is already glorified violence when people consume it to be entertained. No teacher can control what their students feel, nor should they try to police it. I, especially, would be a hypocrite if I discourage students from their interest in the grotesque. My infatuation with slasher films led to this entire project. Horror has an attractive side that people tend to be fascinated by or at least curious about: “The increased arousal of horror-induced fear is invigorating and can be experienced as a reward, especially if one wants to break the emotional routine without risking one’s life” (Bantinaki 390). In this way, horror is pornographic, allowing one to explore their desires without direct consequences. My approach to female slashers does not shun one’s fascination with the material or support violence for the sake of entertainment. Instead, I direct their passion to be intellectually stimulating. I push them to use their dark interests as a productive tool for theorizing the work that we do as English students.

In each of the remaining sections of this paper, I will first establish the nature of the female slashers I have chosen, explain what value they bring as a model for English students, and describe how I have encouraged students to learn from and embrace their inner female slasher through assignments. My intention for this project is to create a feminist model for students that challenges them to embrace English studies’ ambiguous nature. It’s a student’s job to look for answers to questions that are notoriously unknowable, insert themselves into a conversation, and shape the discussion by persuasively communicating what they think. Their job frequently puts them in uncomfortable positions where they feel unsure of themselves and their work, but as

anxious as uncertainty make us, uncertainty breeds possibility. My curriculum asks students to adopt the perspectives of female slashers Ayoola, Amma, and Camille so that students can lean into their anxiety, empower themselves, and invest themselves in their work. The chapters are adapted loosely from the writing process—reading, researching, and composing. Each step is viewed through a slasher lens with a specific female slasher filtering the chapter: Chapter one, Ayoola’s chapter, is about reading to penetrate, cultivating the confidence needed to slash down to the strange, contradictory mess of meaning inside texts; chapter two, Amma’s chapter, covers the need to cut and rearrange so that texts support the student’s work, transforming their research from a whole body of literature into useful bite-sized pieces; and chapter three, Camille’s chapter, discusses composing from the body so that a student’s work is as individualized as they are.

With horror comes uncertainty and anxiety, which often causes people to freeze. However, as Robert Scott presses, “...that man cannot be certain but must act in the face of uncertainty...” (410). The world has rapidly changed over the past year, creating more distance between people than we have ever experienced. Anxiety is high with COVID, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the tumultuous upcoming election, so we need more courses that fight for the highest level of engagement from our students and that prepare them to work through anxiety and resist the urge to ignore uncertainty. English has always been an ambiguous field, but it is time to emphatically incorporate the horror of not knowing and the anxious feelings that come with that in our classes so that students and teachers are more prepared to use these feelings to create something productive. It is an English scholar’s responsibility to shoulder the emotional and intellectual labor of dealing with conflict and the unknown, which is a reminder my class offers to the field.

### **Ayoola: Reading to Penetrate and Slashing the Author**

One of the challenges I face as an English teacher is getting my students to get past a text's surface. It is tempting to go for the most accessible piece of information in the text and look no further. One of this class's goals is to push students as readers to access meaning that is not readily available. Repeating accessible information found in author's interviews instead of making one's own claims can come from laziness, lack of interest, or what I've noticed most is lack of confidence. One of the most memorable moments in my teaching career was when a student shared with me that their favorite thing about this class was that I never made them feel stupid. After hearing this, many of my other students hauled out embarrassing moments from other courses where they felt the teacher or other students made them feel dumb. English students need to be prepared to act even when they feel uncertain. As my students' horror stories demonstrate, there will be times when it is difficult for teachers to navigate those situations with bell hooks wisdom in mind: "To begin [creating an engaging and open classroom] the professor must genuinely value everyone's presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes" (8). While I firmly believe that it is the teacher's responsibility to encourage the students to make bold claims, students also need to empower themselves. Students can decide to withdraw and yield to those in power, or they can "resist the need for certainty, for being right" (Miller 63). They can embrace the conflict and the role of a female slasher by thinking of reading like slashing. That is, they need to look at a text as needing to be penetrated and not get discouraged when they feel like it is not their place to penetrate.

When one uses a slasher's perspective to think about reading, the text becomes a body, and the meaning within the text becomes blood. When I say the text is a body, I mean the

physical words are like skin, an outer layer that presents a being to the world, giving readers something to observe. Beneath that layer is a fluid meaning, changing its contents as it circulates through the chapters, challenging the reader to see and feel it as it pulses or rushes to a concentrated point. For example, Oyinkan Braithwaite's humorous writing in *My Sister the Serial Killer* (MSTSK) helps show students why thinking of a text as a body is necessary. The humorously dark novel set in Lagos, Nigeria shields its darkness with sharp-witted narration. The narrator is a skillful nurse named Korede, who compulsively feels responsible for cleaning up the bodies left by her younger sister, Ayoola. The sisters are completely different from each other but bonded by their abusive father during childhood. Ayoola is a flirtatious, self-absorbed murderer. Her beauty and popularity are unmatched, but she has a nasty habit of stabbing her boyfriends in the heart with her late father's knife. The humor Korede uses to cover up horrific situations gives the reader an excuse to disengage: "*Have you heard this one before? Two girls walk into a room. The room is in a flat. The flat is on the third floor. In the room is the dead body of an adult male. How do they get the body to the ground floor without being seen?*" (Braithwaite 9). The joke is a protective, smooth layer, concealing the complicated violence that is taking place. Falling for a violent joke as "just a joke" stops the reader from considering the sticky, morally ambiguous situation of Korede protecting her murderous little sister. Getting to deeper meaning cannot be a delicate action of peeling back layers as one would with a palimpsest. A student must read to penetrate, breaking through the text's distracting diction and structure and letting the meaning spill out and make a mess.

Oyinkan Braithwaite's *MSTSK* provides a model for penetrating that caters to students who feel like they lack the authority to interpret texts. The traditional slasher is male for a reason: penetration is always coded male. Weapons that penetrate, especially in slasher films, are

representations of the penis. Carol J. Clover describes how their weapons are extensions of their body and calls them “phallic symbols” even when they are in the hands of a female survivor (32). Ayoola is a woman. Therefore, penetration is something done to her, not something she does. *Sharp Objects*’ narrator, Camille, perfectly describes the situation:

Sometimes I think illness sits inside every woman, waiting for the right moment to bloom. I have known so many sick women all my life. Women with chronic pain, with ever-gestating diseases. Women with conditions. Men, sure, they have bone snaps, they have backaches, they have a surgery or two, yank out a tonsil, insert a shiny plastic hip. Women get consumed. Not surprising, considering the sheer amount of traffic a woman’s body experiences. Tampons and speculums. Cocks, fingers, vibrators and more, between the legs, from behind, in the mouth. Men love to put things inside women, don’t they? Cucumbers and bananas and bottles, a string of pearls, a Magic Marker, a fist. (Flynn 320)

Camille elucidates the conditions that cast women as victims. She describes that for a woman being unwell is inevitable because they are relentlessly penetrated. Her natural progression to men loving to penetrate women with anything resembling a shaft or a ball reinforces the power dynamic that a penis gives men license to penetrate, while the vagina invites each orifice on a woman’s body to be penetrated. However, Ayoola does not see her femininity as something that makes her weak.

Ayoola cherishes her body and feminine charms and uses them as a weapon. Korede describes Ayoola’s body, “Hers is the body of a music video vixen, a scarlet woman, a succubus. It belies her angelic face.” She embodies two stereotypes: the sexual temptress men want to possess and the sweet innocent girl they want to protect, but Ayoola uses the deadly combination

to capture her prey. Moments before meeting her next target Ayoola dresses to hunt: “She looks as though she has brought the sunshine in with her. She is wearing a bright yellow shirtdress that by no means hides her generous breasts. Her feet are in green, strappy heels that make up for what she lacks in height, and she is holding a white clutch, big enough to house a nine-inch” (Braithwaite 53). The bright colors, especially sunshine yellow, paints her as innocent, but her exposed breasts highlight her sexual appeal; and she keeps her weapon concealed in a distinctly feminine casing. Her sweet and sexy looks are like honey attracting flies, drawing men in only to drown them. Ayoola’s femininity is just as much a weapon as her knife is. Her identity as an emphatically feminine woman and a slasher demonstrate that one can penetrate even when those in power say it is not their place to do so.

The goal of using Ayoola as a model is to show students that they do not need to adopt characteristics of the authoritative predecessors to be powerful. Many feminist critics have tried to bring masculine strength to women before, using Judith Butler’s “Lesbian Phallus” or Judith Halberstam’s “Female Masculinity.” Judith Kegan Gardiner criticizes Judith Butler, Lori Rifkin, Judith Halberstam, and Robert Nye for reinforcing maleness as the center of power by suggesting women are made powerful when they possess male traits or that masculinity needs to be reformed to include women. Ayoola helps achieve Gardiner’s goal of “making masculinity non-essential to the distribution of power” because her femininity is at the center of her power (621). Ayoola’s strength stems from her womanhood. One could argue that her femininity is not the source of her power because Ayoola does penetrate her victims with a knife that belonged to her dead father. The knife, especially in the slasher genre, is considered phallic, and Ayoola’s use of it clashes with Lorde’s assertion that “*the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*” (Lorde 27). But why is everything pointy considered to be phallic? Why does the phallus

need to be the source of penetrative power anymore? More things penetrate than the phallus, and it is time to move past the unimaginative reading that every pointy object that enters something else is a phallus.

If the knife must represent anything at all, in this context, the tampon is a more suitable symbol to attribute student's penetrative power too than the phallus. Korede juxtaposes Ayoola's knife with tampons: "[Ayoola] carries [her knife] the way other women carry tampons" (Braithwaite 96). The knife as a symbol for a tampon is a more accurate description of the student's penetrative tool because when a student penetrates a text, they absorb the information. Rather than expelling substances, they seek to take the material in even when they may be overwhelmed by the fluidity of the information and some meaning leaks out and escapes them. By establishing this relationship between the tampon and the knife, an object grounded in a history of feminine shame becomes an object for empowerment. Ayoola's emphatically feminine particularities and her role as a slasher demonstrate to students that what they need to read a text deeply is not a missing experience or body part but the confidence that they can "take [their] differences and make them strengths" (Lorde 26-27).

Getting young English students into Ayoola's confident mindset to slash into a text is a gradual process. One obstacle that stands in the way of students reading to penetrate is the author. I agree that working with pop culture texts gives students "the chance to contribute ideas to a relatively untapped area of academic inquiry" (Hughes 96). However, the lack of scholarly articles on *MSTSK* makes students more prone to falling back on interviews with the author as the basis for their analysis. While interviews help identify Braithwaite's rhetorical situation and strategies, Braithwaite's intentions have little to do with the meaning inside the novel or, as Wimsatt and Beardsley would call it, "internal evidence": Internal evidence "is discovered

through the semantics and syntax of a poem, through our habitual knowledge of the language, through grammars, dictionaries, and all the literature which is the source of dictionaries, in general through all that makes a language” (Wimsatt 477). For a student to reach the inner meaning of the text, they must recognize that their authority to read a text is just as strong as the author or any critic’s authority because the text, once released into the world, is not the critics or the author’s but the public’s (470). The argument I am making using female slashers as a lens is similar to the idea Barthes raised in “The Death of an Author:” “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author” (148). Through a female slasher lens the argument becomes the birth of the reader and death of the author happen because the reader slashes the author, severing the author’s ownership over the text and claiming it for themselves. Students need to find a way to take control of their power as readers and slash the author.

I often share Oyinkan Braithwaite’s interviews with the class because knowing the author and their intentions are essential for understanding if their rhetorical strategies were successful, but when asking students to analyze the characters, they tend to state what the Braithwaite has said in her interviews and avoid using the text to develop their answers. One particular comparison that students get stuck on when analyzing Ayoola is when Braithwaite says, “I first began to think of this idea of women killing men when I read up on the Black Widow Spider: the dynamic in nature where after she mates with the male, the female [spider] begins to feel hungry, and then eats him. And so I started playing around with that idea.” (O’Malley 70). This quote in student’s minds writes Ayoola off as nothing but a predator. Using information outside the text is a way to keep one’s hands clean of blood. In other words, the student that tricks themselves into thinking the meaning of the text is absorbed through reading interviews only will not look deep inside the text for answers.

The novel's flashbacks are an excellent place for students distracted by Braithwaite's interview to slash through Ayoola's image as a poisonous spider and expose her fluid identity as a victim and killer. It is as if these flashbacks are lights pressed up against flesh, illuminating a bright red glow and signaling to the reader that there is more than just skin there. They show that Korede and Ayoola's father was physically and emotionally abusive towards all the women in the house, but especially towards Ayoola: He pulls Ayoola around by her hair and throws her for touching his knife (Braithwaite 38–39), beats her for capturing the attention of a young man who followed her home from school (181–85), and attempts to give her away as a gift, a child bride, to a powerful businessman (214–16). The more students learn about her father, the harder they find it to condemn her as an emotionless killer. Ayoola is not just a slasher or a victim. Her identity swishes between the two labels.

With the author still in mind, *MSTSK* provides students with race and culture to contend with as well. Oyinkan Braithwaite is from Nigeria, but went to school in the UK, resulting in a mingling of cultures that can result in students ignoring one of the two cultural influences in the novel. This avoidance becomes clear when students make arguments like “In Nigeria, the older sibling is responsible for the younger siblings, so Korede has no choice but to clean up after Ayoola” and “Nigerian humor is dark, which makes it hard for a Western reader, like me, to understand.” It has been my experience that students emphasize one culture over another to prevent them from having to go through the strenuous process of attempting to understand meaning that is more fluid, like Ayoola's identity. I have also had students who confess to me that they hesitate to call Ayoola's murders wrong, not because they think her misogynistic father has warped her mind or because they think she is defending herself from men who treat her like an object, but because they are afraid to come off as racist or sexist. Conversely, some students

fail to pick up that this novel is set in Nigeria and ignore all the Yoruba language in the novel, overlooking the cultural differences between them and the characters. By either fixating or ignoring racial and cultural differences, the students demonstrate that they are uncomfortable releasing the slippery meaning inside the text.

With my cultural and racial identity being mixed, I understand where student's anxiety comes from. I often feel like the experiences I analyze and write about are not mine to critique and that some authors are safer to defy than others. It is one thing to slash through the text and claims of a white male that has been dead for years, but it is a much more unnerving experience to claim authority over a text written by a living, black woman from a culture I have never fully experienced. However, the alternative is to disengage with the text and pretend that intentional fallacy does not exist. Letting Braithwaite speak for the text would be a safe choice. It would be a way to avoid mistakes like appropriation, silencing voices, or offending entire cultures. However, as bell hooks points out, "If we fear mistakes, doing things wrongly, constantly evaluating ourselves, we will never make the academy a culturally diverse place where scholars and the curricula address every dimension of that difference" (33). Students need to find the guts to engage even if they may be wrong by doing so. The key to approaching material like *MSTSK* is to find a way for readers to slash through the author and into the text without erasing or fetishizing the racially diverse voices within it.

When Countering students' anxiety and tendency to ignore or centralize the issue of race in a novel, Vincent Price's "Double-Face Approach" is a helpful approach. Price argues "that both commonalities and differences can and should be embraced ... [and] race both matters and does not matter" (54). I implement Price's ideas through the Visual Rhetoric Assignment. This task helps alleviate students' anxiety over saying "the wrong thing," by requiring them to

penetrate the text with images. It asks students to draw a visual representation of Korede and Ayoola, encouraging them to pay special attention to their design, writing a brief explanation of how their design shows to what extent the sisters are victims and/or ruthless murderers. They are free to avoid representing race, culture, even gender directly if they desire and use objects as symbols to communicate their arguments to their audience. During this assignment, the work students submit comes in a wide range of forms: bitmojis, collages, digital photos, and hand drawings. Some students even used themselves and family members in the picture, relating to Korede's protective instinct. However, once students have finished designing and executing their pieces, they then need to reevaluate and acknowledge how their choices may affect or be affected by culture and race by discussing their work with the class. After students submit their assignments, we come together as a class and discuss our creations. Apart from it being fun, this exercise's primary purpose is to help students understand how meaning is communicated beyond words and to approach the text more casually before cutting deep.

While studying *MSTSK*, many of my students broke free from the habit of looking skin deep and penetrated the sticky mess of meaning within the novel. One student managed to convey the complexities of Ayoola and Korede's identities in their Visual Rhetoric Assignment. The student took a picture of her two black sisters. Both girls were young, though one was clearly older, probably around the ages of twelve and eight. My student took the photo behind the sisters, and each of the girls held an object behind her back and faced the world, grasping each other's free hand. The eldest, Korede, had a sponge, easily mistaken for a brick with the photo's black and white coloring, while the youngest, Ayoola, held a large knife. Each sister was shaded with a faint color that seemed to ooze over the rest of the image: blue for Korede and red for Ayoola. The image spoke of the fluidity of Korede and Ayoola's identities. Posing them as

young girls highlighted their vulnerability as victims of their father's abuse while having them hold their signature "weapons" behind their backs showed their hidden violent natures. The faint blue and red colors flow into each other in different sections of the photo. There is no clear, crisp line separating the two auras: the blue, the color of water when paired with the image of the sponge, a cleansing, safe color, and the red, the color of blood when paired with the knife, a sinister, warning color. The two contrasting colors get all mixed and demonstrate that the truth is messy, that humans are not so easily categorized as either innocent or violent. Even Korede, who only seems to be involved in cleaning up Ayoola's victims to keep her safe, has murderous thoughts: "I wonder if this is how it is for Ayoola—one minute she is giddy with happiness and good cheer, and the next minute her mind is filled with murderous intent" (Braithwaite 157). This student's image accessed a deeper reading of the novel than the class started with. Ayoola is not just a slasher, and Korede is not just stuck protecting her because they are sisters. They are both motivated by a mixture of violence and victimization.

After composing the Visual Rhetoric Assignment, students more easily grasp the idea that meaning lies beneath the surface. Just as their audience must bore through student's visual rhetoric images to get to their argument, students must puncture the text to get to the fluid meaning within. By the end of the unit, most students understand that the humor in the novel can be a temptation to distance themselves from the messy, difficult to face meaning voluntarily; they must resist the overused, flippant phrase, "It's just a joke."

### **Amma: Productive Murder and Butchering the Text**

This chapter will explain how students can approach their composition pieces after committing murder by slashing the author and the text. I will discuss the aggressive way students need to compose truth, the violent way they need to synthesize, the tangled rhetorical approach students should use to communicate truth effectively, and how students can reconcile with the female slashers tendency to manipulate and deceive. The next slasher that provides a model for thinking about student work is Amma. Amma is a thirteen-year-old girl responsible for three other young girls' death in Gillian Flynn's evocatively dark novel *Sharp Objects*. The narrative follows Amma's half-sister, Camille when she grudgingly returns to Wind Gap to cover a story on the sudden murders of the town's little misfits, nine-year-old Anne Nash and ten-year-old Natalie Keene, entirely unaware that Amma is the murderer. Amma is not a slasher in the sense that she uses a knife to kill, but she aggressively falls into the category of physical foul play, keeping her in the realm of slashers and their intimate methods of killing. Amma strangles Anne and Natalie with her own hands, which is even more personal and dominating than using a weapon that represents her body. Amma also penetrates the young girls by entering their mouths and extracting their teeth postmortem to use as parts for her most prized possession—her dollhouse. Amma is the best female slasher to demonstrate the productive, murderous composition I push my students to commit where they create something new out of the pieces they cut out of a body. She alters between manipulative and rhetorical tactics and shows my students the dangers of ignoring what is right in front of them.

Murder is an act which is both destructive and productive. When one kills, one destroys a life, a body, a sack of fluid reality, and through that destruction, one produces a dead thing, a pile of loose parts, a bloody mess, but as Amma demonstrates, one can take the production further

through composition by creating truth through the repurposing of the collected parts. It is pointless for students to collect a pile of stagnant meaning from a text if they do not use it to produce something else. In fact, in “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic,” Robert Scott states that “action creates truth: ‘truth is not prior and immutable but is contingent. Insofar as we can say that there is truth in human affairs, it is in time; it can be the result of a process of interaction at a given moment.’” (408). In other words, “What is true for [a person] does not exist prior to but in the working out of its own expression” (410). Amma acts on the pile of materials to create truth by producing the dollhouse. Amma sees the connection between her victims’ teeth and the animal teeth it took to make Adora’s ivory floors. She sees a chance to be Adora’s “little doll,” as Camille calls her when noticing how alike Adora and Amma are (Flynn 68). Amma acts by changing the teeth into a symbol that demonstrates she is violent like her mother: “the floor of [her] mother’s room [in the dollhouse]. The beautiful ivory tiles. Made of human teeth. Fifty-six tiny teeth, cleaned and bleached and shining from the floor” (384). This murderous process is composition: hunting, reading, interpreting, cutting, pasting, and repurposing to create. Students need to take the dead things—the quotes they cut out of the text, the paraphrased portions they dismembered—and adapt them into parts so that they can produce their truth, just as Amma changes the teeth into tiles to make a statement about herself and her relationship with her mother.

Zeroing in on how students approach composition like Amma begins with synthesis. Amma effectively synthesizes teeth and hair from three different bodies into one cohesive creation. It is impossible to create a truth, as rhetorical composition aims to do, without cutting away excess flesh. Students want to summarize entire articles, pick topics that warrant novel-length papers, and keep all the author’s ideas intact. They do not feel like they have permission

to decide how to interpret a text, hiding behind phrases like “I think” and “I believe” or including an overwhelming number of block quotes. However, as this project has been trying to demonstrate, it is their job to pick a way to read the text and decide what their research or literature says about the world. They need more than the confidence to pierce a text. They need the confidence to trim the fat and butcher all articles, novels, and accounts of reality to make them productive.

Approaching synthesis like it is a polite conversation is not necessarily the best way to teach an English student the confidence to incorporate pieces of text smoothly into their writing. Having students think of all their writing as conversational is a way of casting our students as the Final Girl, the heroine who tells the story. But one needs to let go of the romanticized version of synthesis when they are producing their contributions. The student listens and replies to the arguments of the text and their authors. In this way, a conversation occurs—However, it is one-sided. In a conversation, the individual speaking gets to decide what they say and how they say it, but when one synthesizes texts, the student infers the authors arguments and how each author may agree or disagree with each other. In reality, the authors and bodies of text do not have any say in how they are displayed or interpreted, like Natalie, Ann, and Lily do not get to decide what Amma takes from them or how it gets used to create her dollhouse. Like a female slasher, the student must carefully select pieces of their corpse-like sources, cut, and arrange them in their own context whether the author agrees with the use of their work or not. As Amma imposes her will on the girls, a student needs to impose their will on their materials, and they can get there by adopting Amma’s mentality.

Amma's mentality towards her victims demonstrates the surgical way students should think about literature and research. Camille and Amma's first perceptions of Lily, Amma's third

kill, shows where students need to get to in order to synthesize effectively. Camille describes Lily as the following: “She was as bright as Amma, with a sunnier outlook. She had a spray of freckles, oversized front teeth, and hair the color of chocolate, which Amma pointed out was the exact shade of the rug in my old bedroom” (Flynn 382). Camille sees all of Lily's details as necessary, but Amma fixates on the one piece of the girl that she can use for her dollhouse. A peaceful conversation with a source can lead to a student taking their audience through every point a source makes whether it is relevant or not when what the student needs to do is fixate on the portion(s) useful for their project. Admittedly, Amma dehumanizes Lily. In another context, I can see how it would make some uncomfortable for me to encourage them to mirror Amma's mindset, but while texts are a part of the authors that gave birth to them, texts are not people and their meaning is not owned by their author as much as it may feel that way. By embracing Amma's version of violent synthesis students can stop looking at a piece of text as an authoritative figure looming over them, demanding that they reiterate the author's truth. Students can learn to adapt a critic's theory to support *their* ideas and they can create *their* truth out of the meaning they find in the text.

With that said, I had some eager students more ready than most to embrace the female slasher's aggressive power. As most teachers have experienced, some students can get carried away with their ability to interpret and end up deciding the text means whatever they want it to mean. Amma proved to be useful in helping students see that they are not magicians, able to pull things out of thin air. They are slashers and, therefore, limited by the body in front of them. After discovering the contents of the dollhouse, Camille notes, “Lily Burke's chocolate-colored hair Amma braided into a rug for [Camille's] room in her dollhouse” (387). The hair's specific color and use are important to mention here because it shows Amma respects Lily's hair for what it is.

Even though Amma cuts it into parts and uses it for her own purpose, she does not dye it to change its color or pretend its wood just because it is brown. Amma recognizes that her materials' particularities are meaningful. Her treatment of Lily's hair demonstrates to students the fine line between interpretation and fabrication.

Amma's approach to composition seems like it would be repulsive, but her presentation shows she has a handle on rhetoric and demonstrates the kind of horrifying truth students should strive for. For female slashers, the goal is to be horrific while charming their audience and ensuring their alluring nature overshadows their threatening presence. With Amma as an example, I challenge the learners in my class to be ambitious enough to produce horror while composing something inviting to their audience. Products of horror go beyond "physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge" (Carroll 56). Students should be as threatening as female slashers on a theoretical, intellectual level. Meaning, they should create a truth that goes beyond what humans currently believe they are capable of knowing, something so forcefully far-reaching that it is scary. At the same time, students should not just hack up different parts and sew them together with thick stitches like Buffalo Bill's skinsuit in *Silence of the Lambs* directed by Johnathan Demme or Frankenstein's monster in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. Their work should have the same finesse that Amma's dollhouse possesses.

The secret to Amma's dollhouse is that it is easy to look at. A little girl playing with her toys is familiar. Amma makes the outside inviting, but the dollhouse's contents expose the darkest parts of her family. The changes Amma makes to Adora's floor transform her mother's regal household into a haunted dwelling space for little girls' tortured souls, fitting since Adora has Munchausen by proxy. Her dollhouse tells the audience that Adora and Amma are

dangerous, that they both hurt little girls, but Amma finds a way to be “cognitively threatening” without alienating her audience. Amma’s dollhouse mirrors Oyinkan Braithwaite’s ability to tell an entertaining, humorous story with jokes while deep beneath the lines showing the audience how violent jokes can be. Hiding the horrifying truth beneath the roof of the dollhouse forces the audience to witness her violent behavior without driving them away. Studying Amma after Korede and Ayoola shows students how to draw fluid meaning out of the text and wrap the mess in an inviting package for their readers’ consumption.

Even though a female slasher’s strategy to gift wrap truths that are difficult to face in pretty paper only invites them to engage with those truths, this tactic raises questions about manipulation. Students are shocked to find out Amma is the murderer after Adora’s arrest. The shock Amma induces when Camille reveals the contents of her dollhouse makes students feel tricked. More than my students, my peers have raised concerns about manipulation as a theme in this class. My fellow student-teachers have often been concerned about the possibility that by teaching my students to emulate female slashers like Amma, I am teaching my students to emulate malicious manipulators. I do not entirely agree that manipulation is always malicious, but I would be lying if I said I was not concerned about students confusing manipulation with rhetoric, as they are both tools in the female slasher’s armory. Yet, contrary to what some of my peers may think, teaching Amma motivates students to pursue the difference between manipulation and rhetoric aggressively.

When discussing manipulation, I start by pushing my students to consider rhetoric as a means of persuading and manipulation as a means of forcing. Gary Remer’s discussion of rhetoric and emotional manipulation provides a helpful list for students to start identifying the difference between them. Remer agrees that manipulation “forces... intentional[ly]” and adds

that “manipulation [has] bad consequences for hearers and deni[es] autonomous decision making” (441). Thus, the starting point for understanding when someone is practicing manipulation is that part of the speaker’s purpose is to make the audience believe something is true without giving them a choice, and their methods tend to<sup>2</sup> hurt their audience. Using these parameters to discuss Amma, the class decides Amma is downright manipulative with the little girls she murders: 1) She forces her victims to submit to her physical will by using her friends to outnumber and detain them: “the three blondes held Ann down” (Flynn 385); 2) Amma intentionally plans to trick her victims, lying to get them into the woods: “*It’s a game. Come with me, we’ll play*” (386); 3) Amma intentionally harms them because it feels good: “Amma enjoyed hurting. *I like violence*, she’d shrieked at [Camille]” (392); 4) she deprives Anne and Natalie of their free will by hitting Ann on the head with a rock so that Ann would not run away and locking Natalie in a shed so that Natalie could not escape (385-386). From the perspective of her victims, the female slasher is a malicious manipulator. However, this is only one defined situation. There are other situations in which Amma is more rhetorical than manipulative.

When one looks at Amma from other points of view like Camille’s, Amma’s strategies are rhetorical. Amma asks Camille to pay attention to her dollhouse, veering away from manipulation and towards persuasion by giving Camille autonomy, but Camille never chooses to engage with the dollhouse until the end of the novel. Amma hides the teeth in the most obvious place like the Minister does in Poe’s “The Purloined Letter:” “Such is the proper place, where the letter can be found, where its meaning can be found and where the Minister believes it is the

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<sup>2</sup>I say tends to here because I do not fully agree with Remner that manipulation always results in harm. For example, if a parent teaches a child that the stove is still hot even when it is not, the parent intentionally leverages their power of authority to force their kid into believing something that is not true for the purpose of protecting them. Harm when it comes to manipulation is more subjective than force.

most protected, but where in fact, in its very hiding place, it is the most utterly exposed” (Derrida 150). Amma puts the teeth in their “proper place” by using them to make a replica of her mother’s ivory floors, made out of tusks and animal teeth, and she put them where she thinks it is “most protected,” her dollhouse that only Amma and her complicit friends play with. This “most utterly exposed” hiding place may be a ploy to keep others from finding Amma’s dirty secret, but Amma seems to want Camille to discover them. Amma asks her sister to play with and look at her dollhouse: “Play dolls with me, Camille.” “Don’t I have the most beautiful dollhouse?” (Flynn 305; 348). Amma directly invites Camille to look inside the dollhouse. While her invites could be seen as a manipulative trick, Amma’s reaction to Camille finally looking into the dollhouse suggests she was never trying to hide anything from Camille. After Adora is arrested for the murders of Ann and Natalie, a third girl turns up dead where Amma just moved to, so Camille tears through the house looking for proof of Amma’s guilt. During Camille’s search, Amma does not try to stop her. She is “calm” and “smug” (384). These adjectives indicate that Amma feels arrogant like she has been waiting for Camille to notice finally. Her honesty with Camille and choice to allow Camille to discover the truth without force shows Amma’s tactics in this situation are persuasive rather than manipulative.

Amma tries to persuade her sister to look through the dollhouse and discover the truth but Camille refuses to engage. Even though Amma does not intentionally draw Camille’s attention away from the dollhouse, as the Minister does with the Queen’s adulterous letter, some of the criticism on “The Purloined Letter” can help to expose how Camille is partly to blame for the horrors in Amma’s dollhouse going undiscovered throughout most of the novel. Camille is guilty of what Derrida criticizes Lacan for in Lacan’s reading of “The Purloined Letter:” “blank-filling,” which Barbra Johnson goes on to accuse Derrida and every other critic with a

“theoretical frame of reference” including herself, stating that a “frame of reference” contributes to “the blindness of any interpretative insight” (464;492). Johnson’s further explains her point when she uses Dupin in “The Purloined Letter” to demonstrate that readers are looking “beyond Lacan’s signifier instead of at it” (499). Applying Johnson’s work to Camille, Camille is looking at what the dollhouse symbolizes, a child’s toy, rather than looking at it for what it is, a product of murder—Amma’s trophy case: “‘This dollhouse is my fancy.’ She almost made it sound natural, *my fancy*” (Flynn 68). Camille indicates that she notices something oddly intimate about Amma’s relationship with her dollhouse, but does not act on it. She does not “‘untie’ [the knot]” as Johnson would say (498). Instead, Camille ignores the various traces of meaning Amma’s language points to, neglects the dollhouse’s contents, and lets herself be blind, filling in the blank with the thought that a dollhouse is just a child’s toy.

Part of what makes this horror curriculum so useful, especially for first year students is that I can teach them the ambiguous theories not just by thinking and discussing them but by allowing my students to experience them. Horror because it is accessible and immersive, especially in film, pushes students to fully engage with the abstract theories at play, pulling them into immediacy. For example, just as the class puts pressure on Camille’s , I put pressure on my students’ judgment as well, but not with “The Purloined Letter.” Poe’s short story teaches students a valuable lesson about overlooking what is right in front of the reader, but it is not the most effective text for students to learn from within the class context.

The most useful piece of literature for looking at the material rather than beyond it is the Guard Brothers’ 2009 film *The Uninvited*, featuring female slasher Anna. The movie follows two sisters, Anna and Alex, as they try to prove their stepmother was responsible for their biological mother’s murder. Anna, the protagonist, is released from a mental health facility at the start of

the film. Subsequently, she suffers from hallucinations that border on haunting as she tries to uncover the truth of what happened the night her mother burned to death in a fire. Rachel Summers, her stepmother and family nurse, seems like the perfect wife but displays a mean streak as a mother. However, just as the class begins to fear for Anna's life, Alex murders Rachel with a kitchen knife, or so my students thought. When Anna's father comes home, he reveals that Alex died in the fire that killed her mother, so Anna had only been imagining Alex was alive the entire movie and was really the one who killed Rachel. This revelation triggers a series of flashbacks where Anna sees herself starting the fire that killed her mom and sister. Anna starts the fire by accident, blinded by the violent impulse to burn her father alive when she catches him cheating with Rachel. The ending suggests that Anna was not delusional but tricked the audience intentionally: when Anna returns to the mental health facility, she tells her doctor, "I finished what I started" (1:21:44-1:21:47), referring to killing everyone in her family but her father. After this exchange—another female-patient known for stabbing children and killing everyone in the family but the father—greeted Anna by saying, "Welcome home," as if Anna has just completed a series of trials successfully and is back where she belongs; Anna smiles in response (1:22:08-1:22:25). Her confidence at the end of the film suggests that Anna controlled everything the audience saw from start to finish. I put a female slasher with almost the same name as the last surprise killer in virtually the same situation: Anna and Amma are both the youngest, most favored child, and they both turn to their older sister for protection when faced with an unfriendly mothering figure. Introducing Anna directly after Amma enacts the lesson of "The Purloined Letter" while sticking with the theme of the class.

Anna uses slasher films' tropes to demonstrate that people will choose to believe what they already think they know rather than what is in front of them. Anna plays the Final Girl role,

the misunderstood victim who needs protection, and then leaves the students with a wicked smile that says, “Look how easily you believed me.” When Anna’s father reveals her to be the slasher and the scary stepmother to be the victim, students do not merely feel tricked; they feel betrayed. Still, the lesson of “The Purloined Letter” was learned. After the initial shock, students come up with a bunch of hints that were right in front of them the whole time, such as, Anna’s hallucinations should have flagged her as unreliable, her arms were bruised from being grabbed after her boyfriend “fell” off a cliff, and, most obvious, no one ever talked to Alex other than Anna even when Alex was yelling at other people. My students knew that something was off with Anna’s narrative, but they chose to ignore it as Camille did with Amma because following that impulse feeling that something is not right takes them off the safe, well-traveled path and an isolated rough one. Student’s experience with Anna’s story exposes the need to be brave enough to move away from familiar thinking patterns so that they can recognize when there is a change and create change themselves.

### **Camille: Vulnerability and Embodied Rhetoric When You Are the Author**

Thus far, each chapter has essentially been about building the confidence students need to be aggressive like female slashers, casting away the doubts students have about themselves. I have asked my students to exhibit bold bravery when penetrating the text during the reading process and unapologetically authoritative when they carve and prepare their research and readings for their composition projects. In this final chapter, however, I will now discuss the confidence students need when they become the author and put themselves in a powerful yet vulnerable position, exposing themselves as they expose their truth. Working with feminist theory and embodied rhetoric to analyze *Sharp Objects*' Camille Preaker and her complicated relationship with her body, I will explain why it is necessary to position the body in scholarship, how including the body makes students vulnerable, and how I use my own body to empower my students to be vulnerable. Both students and teachers need to be vulnerable for students to succeed in composing from the body.

Camille provides a model for thinking about the body's position in scholarship that matches the feminist agenda. She is a literal example of Audre Lorde's ideas about the body's relationship to literature: "She perceives her body as a text and is conscious of her texts as emerging from her body" (Morris 168). Camille has been subject to society's reading of the female body at every stage of her life. "Fifth grade. Two boys cornered a girl at recess and had her put a stick inside herself," after which the teacher made the little girl apologize to everyone (Flynn 172). This anecdote echoes a harmful mentality that boys can get away with violence because they cannot control themselves, and little girls are responsible for what others do to their bodies. When detective Richard asks Camille to tell him about some of the town's violent incidents, Camille says, "Once, an eighth-grade girl got drunk at a high-school party and four or

five guys on the football team had sex with her, kind of passed her around. Does that count?” (176–77). Camille’s hesitation to consider this rape violence demonstrates how sexual violence against women is normalized, especially in small conservative towns. And in her adult life, as a reporter, Camille is privy to newsworthy stories about men hunting women: “there was a serial killer stalking a more glamorous city, Seattle. Amid the fog and coffeehouses, someone was carving up pregnant women, opening their bellies, and arranging the contents in shocking tableaux for his own amusement” (61); and Richard tells Camille about a case where a man “scratched [the inside of women’s] throats to pieces” with his own hands (89). Society reads the female form as a source of wrongness, an object that can be abused from girlhood through adulthood, and Camille internalizes this foul reading of femininity.

Camille exposes the hate she absorbs through the scars on her skin. When she returns to Wind Gap to report on the murders her half-sister commits, Camille confesses to the reader that she has a problem with self-harm: “I am a cutter, you see. Also a snipper, a slicer, a carver, a jabber. I am a very special case. I have a purpose. My skin, you see, screams. It’s covered with words—*cook, cupcake, kitty, curls*... are often feminine in a Dick and Jane, pink vs puppy dog tails sort of way” (Flynn 94). Camille’s body expresses stereotypical femininity through self-harm because society has told her violence is what women’s bodies deserve. In Camille’s own words, “a child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort” (392). The scarred woman learned from other people to read her body as an object, and she chose to use it as paper.

The purpose Camille mentions having is to expose the ugliness society infuses into every woman’s beautiful body. Her cuts are a physical manifestation of how the young reporter defines reality; they are Camille’s truth. Describing her scars, Camille says,

All I know is that the cutting made me feel safe. It was proof. Thoughts and words, captured where I could see them and track them. The truth, stinging on my skin, in a freakish shorthand. Tell me you're going to the doctor, and I'll want to cut *worrisome* on my arm. Say you've fallen in love and I buzz the outlines of *tragic* over my breasts. (98)

Camille's writing is utterly inseparable from her skin and emotions. As literal and horrific as Camille's composition is, she puts her body at the center of meaning-making, which is the point Lorde is making and where other feminist critics would say students should position their bodies.

For students to write literature that exposes their ideas about society, their work needs to come from their bodies. It is common to ask students to refrain from using "I" and personal experience in academic writing because "the erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies" (hooks 139). I know that stopping students from getting too personal is necessary to prevent their point from getting lost in their anecdotes or to prevent students from claiming experiences that are not theirs to claim, but asking students to distance themselves from their topics virtually ignores the lessons of feminist theory: Instructors need to recognize and encourage the fact that "our bodies inform our way of knowing" (M. Johnson 39); "erasure of the body connects to the erasure of class differences, and more importantly, the erasure of the role of university settings as sites for the reproduction of a privileged class of values, of elitism" (hooks 140). What feminist critics are getting at is denying students the opportunity to think about their bodies within academic discourse stops them from engaging deeply with their arguments, and preventing students from incorporating themselves into their work denies them the possibility of producing anything with a unique perspective that can change what one believes to be true. Their work

should stem from their bodies, partly defined by society and by themselves, as Camille demonstrates.

To be clear, I do not ask my students to sacrifice their bodies to expose their truths or commit self-harm to make a statement. Camille acts like she makes light of her self-harm, but her attitude is not proud or encouraging: “Over the years I’ve made my own private jokes. You can really read me. Do you want me to spell it out for you? I’ve certainly given myself a life sentence. Funny, right? I can’t stand to look at myself without being completely covered” (Flynn 98). Her sentence following her rhetorical question, “Funny right?” dismantles the structured jokes she used to underplay her habit of carving up her entire body. Self-harm is a solemn subject, but thinking about Camille’s literal scarification shows students that they are in a strange predicament as writers on a theoretical level. When they compose, students take a dominating position to define while simultaneously putting themselves in a situation that leaves who they are vulnerable to attack as they invite people to read and edit their work. Just as Camille’s words are her skin, students that allow their work to come from a personal place within their bodies can feel anatomically connected to their work. When the editor rearranges their essay, they may feel puppeteered. This curriculum asks students to recognize they commit the violence of a female slasher and then submit to the same violence.

In addition to students’ bodies making them vulnerable to others, students are vulnerable to their own bodies. Camille’s particular situation of self-harm demonstrates to students the lack of rhetorical control they have over their bodies when they listen to and look at them. Such is the lesson embodied rhetoric explains: Positioning the body in the classroom “requires expanding the understanding of embodiment, and by extension, feminist rhetorics, which demands an ethical reading of bodies and recognition of bodies as people—not objects” (M. Johnson 40);

“bodies both inscribe and are inscribed upon” (42). As this theory suggest, Camille’s body has just as much rhetorical control as she does. Camille tells the reader, “My body was heading into a flare. I paced a bit, tried to remember how to breathe right, how to calm my skin. But it blared at me. Sometimes my scars have a mind of their own” (Flynn 94). Her skin teeters between being the composition piece Camille exerts her will upon and the composer of the truth as it forces Camille to feel its presence: “Sometimes I can hear the words squabbling at each other across my body (97). It often makes Camille leave conversations, overwhelming her with emotions, or shuts conversations down by shocking Camille’s audience with its presence. The power Camille’s body exerts over her demands students to recognize the rhetorical power their bodies have over them. They need to recognize how their bodies position them to their audience, limit and empower the perspective they write from and influence their opinions with emotional and physical responses beyond their control.

How to approach positioning students’ bodies in the class is a tricky process, especially in the post-COVID-19 world. The first time I taught my female slashers class was in person. I incorporated embodied rhetoric through class discussion. We spent a whole class period thinking about how body language, race, clothing, emotions, and facial expressions affect our interactions and discussing how those experiences can inform our writing. Speaking about our bodies together in the same physical with all of our eyes on each other felt like an excellent way to help students find their bodies in the class and realize how vulnerable it can feel to allow them in. However, in the next term, my class was suddenly transitioned online with no class meetings in person or online. The only interaction between students were online discussion boards. This unit’s original lesson plan depended on having an in-person discussion where the presence of the

body could be known while being discussed, but distance learning has pushed me to explore other ways of establishing the body's existence in the class.

Now, I assign the Self-Composition Assignment to allow students the space to explore embodied rhetoric hands-on in a familiar online environment, Instagram. On a private class Instagram page that I created, I have students submit The Self-Composition Assignment, which asks them to empathize with Camille and embrace her embodied composition approach. Their task is to create an image that portrays what they think of themselves while also showing they are conscious of others' superficial view of them. Thus, students face a situation where their bodies are the actual text. The following description is how I introduce the assignment:

Camille's self-slashing is a very particular method of composition, and it is done for a rhetorical purpose. Perhaps she is cutting to expose the pain, ugliness, and imperfection that lingers just below beautiful presentations. Maybe she is trying to preserve her story, making it impossible for people to say she was perfect and lived a perfect life after her death; or she might be desperate to connect with her mother and her way of doing so involves cutting words that are symbolic of her mother and her hometown. Either way, her scars are influenced by what she thinks of herself, what she thinks of other people, and what other people think of her.

Use Camille to think about how when we write, we are writing ourselves. Her body is made up of words and the words are made up of her body. They're impossible to separate. Her embodied rhetoric reflects the composition process. No matter how objective we aim to be, our words reflect our thoughts, our feelings, and ourselves, which is why, for most, sharing writing publicly is uncomfortable. For some, it is even horrifying. (If you feel like this isn't the case, ask yourself if you are truly practicing

rhetorical composition or if you are more recycling/reposting material. I am not trying to get you to care more, but it is my job to get you to recognize what composition is and what kind of English student you want to be.)

Camille's composition can make us aware of the deliberate ways we compose ourselves for an audience. That is, the makeup, clothes, colors, hairstyles, poses, etc. are all influenced by our ideas and the ideas of others. Whether we realize it or not, when we post a picture of ourselves or when we get ready to go out in public, we are making a persuasive statement about how we want to be seen.

The assignment pushes the students to engage in a way that shows them that it is okay to feel vulnerable when interacting with and producing a text.

I recognize that by asking students to be vulnerable, I am partly asking them to feel unsafe, but it is my job to ensure that classroom culture is a safe space for them to shed their protective outer layer and expose their internal thoughts. Intending to fulfill my role, I participated in the Self-Composition Assignment myself. I posted the following photo on our class Instagram account.



My goal for the photo was to show how vulnerable I see myself because others view me as a young woman of color, and to have fun with it by turning my vulnerabilities against my audience. The curtsy and the color pink depict how significant my gender is in defining me to my audience. The handprints show how my female body is sometimes viewed as an object—no barriers protecting it from others' grubby hands. The overwhelming purplish-blue color takes over my skin and most of the environment so that it is hard to tell where my body begins and ends, blurring my identity as a person and a color. I chose pink and purplish-blue to represent my skin color because my "mixed" light-brown, Asian, Pacific Islander skin color has never felt normal. In my first year of graduate school, a speaker came to a Toni Morrison/William Faulkner seminar I was taking and spoke on what it is like to be black in Spokane. The speaker started the speech with, "It doesn't matter if you're black, white, or purple..." I do not remember the rest of the sentence because I was busy thinking, "I must be purple." This revealing image exposes my vulnerabilities as a young woman of multiple colors, and sharing it with my students exposes my vulnerabilities as an authoritative teacher.

Many teachers fear that their authority will be threatened if they are vulnerable in front of their students. As bell hooks writes, "I think our fear of losing students' respect has discouraged many professors from trying new teaching practices" (145). I can relate to hook's theory. I was terrified on my first day of teaching when my students assumed I was also a student and exchanged confused looks when I stepped up to the board before asking me if I was the teacher. Not on that first day nor during my entire first year of teaching, would I have ever thought that I would be sharing an exposing picture of myself with my students. I imagine that some would frown upon me digitally giving myself to my class, but how can I ask my students to be vulnerable if I am not willing to do the same?

After releasing this photo to the Instagram page, I do not feel that all my authority in the class was shattered or that my students see me as just another student. By participating in this assignment, I demonstrate my commitment to my curriculum and show my students that we are “a community of learners together” (153). I can embody the seemingly aggressive Ayoola and Amma as much as I want—slashing and dominating the English curriculum rotted with androcentrism—but Camille shows me that I need to slash myself. I need to expose my inner self, the truth beneath the layer of power I possess as a teacher so that I empower students to feel safe enough to take risks in their composition pieces.

I am not the only teacher that draws inspiration from hooks and views teaching from a vulnerable position as a strength. In Enrich N. Pitcher’s argument about becoming a feminist teacher, he discusses the importance of being vulnerable with students. The teaching style he practices, “engaged pedagogy,” partly requires him to teach by “leading with vulnerability” (153). Pitcher gives examples of what leading with vulnerability means to him by sharing that he answered “any questions [students] wanted to ask for twenty minutes,” the most disarming one being “What is your love language?” (156). I have a similar method: I allow students to ask one question per day, but everyone must answer it so as students get to know me I also get to know them. The most central way Pitcher shared his vulnerability was by reading a prepared statement about his “imperfections”:

I am going to fuck up, do and say racist things. Be cis-centric, express white masculine dominance. How we as a learning community respond to this uneasy power dynamic is critically important. There is always a power differential between teachers and students, regardless of my efforts to reduce those differentials, but I do hope that you can show me

the love to provide me feedback for when I do and the grace for knowing I am trying (156).

He emphasizes that he is in a learning position like his students, a position where he will inevitably be wrong. Pitcher does not shy away from the idea that he was once a student. His argument begins with an account of the time he spent in that student role, learning from feminist teachers, women who “nurtured” and “supported” him (152). I respect Pitcher’s unwillingness to let go of his status as a student and how his vulnerability informs his approach to teaching his course, but I am in a different position than Pitcher. Pitcher reconciles with his privilege as a white man stating, “This presumption that sticks to my body that white men cannot be feminists is erroneous at best, and profoundly dangerous at worst” (151). However, Pitcher’s ability to be a feminist does not change the different positions we are placed in at each term’s start.

It is not hard for me to lower my status in students’ eyes as an authority figure because I start in a subaltern position. Most students still greet me each term by expressing their surprise that I am their teacher and not a student in their class. I counter by saying, “I am a student but also a teacher.” Because of my status as a student and my vulnerability as a young woman of color, I would have to fight to approach the authority Pitcher and other white men like him have the moment they walk into a classroom, but I choose not to. Instead, I cultivate mutual respect and take advantage of the proximity to my students that my seemingly low status allows me, while Pitcher and other older, whiter men fight to “reduce [power] differentials” (156) and reach my level of rapport. In many ways, I follow the female slasher model I offer to my students, working the system that presence me as a victim to my advantage.

Of course, my emphasis on rapport leaves me vulnerable to the occasional inappropriate comment and derogatory remark. I ended my first quarter teaching with a bold young man

announcing to the class that they had “popped [my] teaching cherry.” This experience was horrifying to me. Even as I write this, I am fighting back tears and embarrassment, yet this overwhelming wave of emotion reinforces my point. If I withdrew, buried this experience, been “boring” like one of my peers suggested, or dressed in all black and made my voice “intense and serious” during class like another one offered, then I would have sacrificed my body and my female slasher curriculum may never have come about. English classes need to stop avoiding emotions and recognize how their bodies construct their responses in academic discourse and face them to make change. Through facing this horrific teaching moment, I am able to teach a curriculum where I can be my vulnerable best self, give my students a uniquely engaging classroom experience, while maintaining mutual respect with them.

In the Self-Composition assignment, I was surprised by how willing students were to follow my lead and be vulnerable. One of my students came out as trans to the class, and another student used the assignment to think about how they use social media filters to control their body, pasting together filtered and unfiltered pieces of their face. To be fair, some students got caught up in taking the photo and failed to explain the ideas behind it, and others did not feel comfortable posting their pictures for the class to look at. I understand this assignment can be emotionally demanding, but it is an excellent opportunity for students to gain practice exploring their bodies in an academic context and to reignite the presence of the body in distance learning. As the pandemic changes the classroom, teachers should find more ways to help students find, embrace, and cope with their bodies in academic space.

## Conclusion

This class was not an easy one to create. I doubted myself and the ethics of asking young adults to be female slashers many times throughout. My own curriculum scared me, but by continuing to work with it, I discovered an empowering, feminist way to approach the practice and teaching of English studies. The violence female slashers commit against others and themselves makes students and teachers shrink. It is not always easy for students to come to terms with their violent nature. It is easier to dismiss Ayoola's killing of men as wrong, Amma's killing of little girls as the work of a sociopath, and Camille's self-harm as mental illness, but if one does not run from the horror of their actions, one can learn from them. Female slashers are exact and confident. They are willing to face the dark things when those around them hide from behind smiles and niceties. Ayoola shows Korede society's shallow nature, Amma unearths for Camille Adora's murderous mothering, and Camille wakes her mind to Amma's deadly dollhouse. They are aggressive in their pursuits, but unlike their Michael Myers, they are not indestructible or impervious to the consequences of their actions. Female slashers acknowledge the limits and strengths of their body's position within their respective communities.

As a student-model, female slashers ownership of her violent tendencies without the redemptive language of remorse pushes students to contend with the violence in our field. Reading, researching, and composing are all acts of intellectual violence. English scholars take authors and other critics' writing, slice them to pieces, tear them inside out, and arrange them in our work how we please. But in the process, we also expose ourselves and the way we see society, asking our audience to look at the horrors they reason away and avoid. In our worst and best state, we are female slashers, reading and slashing, synthesizing and disfiguring, composing and exposing. Recognizing ourselves as female slashers position and the horror in our field

brings students closer to reading and writing with power beyond the ability to describe: the power to participate in society, to create truth, to change things.

The final projects demonstrate the rewards of this curriculum. The final project asks the students to take the lessons of female slasher literature and apply them to the communities surrounding them. One of my students entirely exceeded my expectations for vulnerable, exposing composition informed by the literature and the body. The student was bothered by the behavior of law enforcement in *MSTSK* and *Sharp Objects*. The police in both novels enabled the female slashers' murderous behavior. They failed to see Ayoola and Amma as suspects because of their feminine appearances. The ignorance of the police force inspired the student to address the same problem in their own community. Being transgender, this student chose to focus on LGBTQ relationships with the police force on campus. My students felt that the police did not care about protecting them or making them feel safe because the LGBTQ community was "not normal." The student theorized that the lack of knowledge on both sides led to a gap between the two organizations and that they might bridge the two by penetrating the campus police's space and giving a presentation on behalf of the LGBTQ community. During the creation of the project, the student expressed to me how scared they were to step into a role of power before the authoritative force on campus, which caused them and their community so much fear by being inaccessible. In that student's eyes and in many students' eyes, law enforcement is a punishing force, not a protective one. The presentation's goal was to encourage both communities to get to know each other so that some of the fear may be alleviated.

Their talk went incredibly well; campus law enforcement was impressed with the fairness of their research and was more than open to their ideas of bridging the distance between the two communities. Directly after the meeting, they went to their space on campus, the LGBTQ center,

to talk with their community about hosting an event with the campus police to promote open communication. This student embodied what this class is trying to achieve. They penetrated the literature, applied it the way they deemed appropriate, and allowed their project to emerge from their body by addressing their position as a transgender student. They were willing to go to scary places and face issues others politely ignored. My student shouldered the emotional and intellectual labor to create change when the ones in power would not.

Now, in a world that has become a breeding ground for fear amidst Covid-19 and disgusting displays of police brutality such as in the case of George Floyd, there is a space and a need for this curriculum. I do not imagine Ayoola, Amma, and Camille will creep out of the dark closet and into the light of literary legends like Huck Finn or Hester Prynne. Still, they are engaging and useful models for budding English students. The three slashers kept participation up for my class that was quickly transitioned into a virtual learning environment with no live class discussions. As students were transitioning, there was anger and anxiety, but there was also delight and fun. Approaching English studies like a female slasher can empower students to navigate the uncertainty of a messy text and, by extension, a messy society. Students learn to confidently adapt theories to support their work, be rhetorically thoughtful when pushing people to confront ugly realities, and listen to their bodies when their presences feel erased by others.

Students should confidently feel the effects of horror when they are reading and writing. I want students to lean into their anxiety of being unsure when reading and producing a text because it opens them up to more possibilities of meaning. I want students to know it is okay to feel uncomfortable when researching because that means they are building on their predecessors' work rather than repeating it. I want students to produce something so different, odd, or exposing that it scares them because that is how they will know they are creating truth.

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