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# Body Like a Chainsaw, Mouth Like a Machete: The Black Best Friend in the American Slasher Film

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"Now, what does that have to do with the movie?" Jada Pinkett Smith's character in *Scream 2* (Craven 1997), though only given a short and bloody appearance in the first ten minutes, makes her criticisms of the slasher film loudly known. From the moment she enters the theatre to her violent death, Maureen Evans, Pinkett's character, maintains a critically resistant gaze to the mock film *Stab*. She critiques the film right until her death: "Don't do that. I wouldn't do that. Why does she have to be naked?" She voices the opinions and statements spectators like myself have had of the slasher film, no matter how much I've enjoyed the genre.

Maureen's questions about the role of Black people and women in horror films help me pose my own: what is the function of the Black best friend in the slasher film? Hallie (Elise Neal) in *Scream 2*, Karla (Brandy Norwood) in *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* (Cannon 1998), Kia (Kelly Rowland) in *Freddy Vs Jason* (Yu 2002), and Brooke (Reign Edwards) in *Hell Fest* (Plotkin 2018) function as the more socially adept foil to the white protagonists. They display the same mannerisms as each other and, sarcastic but caring, follow the almost exact same scripts in trying to get their friend to come out of their shell. For the last twenty years, the Black best friend has maintained the same patterned functionality throughout the genre and across franchises. This can also be seen in movies like *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992), *Prom Night* (2008), and *Haunt* (2019).

The slasher film, a genre typified in the late seventies, typically follow a young white woman and her young white friends as they are stalked and killed by a masked maniac. These earlier films were seen as "deeply misogynistic" with "a key pleasure … [being to see] a young, overtly sexualized woman stabbed to death [while also displaying] unconscious anxieties about … male dominance" (Kuhn and Westfell 2020). Moreover, from the start of their inception, slasher films as a whole have been seen as a genre that punishes feminine transgressions (sex, partying, and drugs) and abnormal masculinity (represented by the killers) through their own phallic weapons.

More Black people appeared in slasher sequels during the nineties and early 2000s, with many of them being popular Black artists such as pop R&B singer Brandy in *ISKWYDLS* and Kelly Rowland of Destiny's Child in *Freddy vs. Jason*. Robin R. Means-Coleman writes, "Studios who tapped into the Black movie business were well aware of the increasing popularity of rap music—and more importantly, the increasing popularity of rap music with white, middle-class teens" (2023, 244). As such, with these increases studios were more willing to diversify their cast to include Black actors within established horror franchises. Along with this, the nineties also transformed the original slasher film of the seventies and eighties to the neo-stalker film, which were more self-referential and featured protagonists that were "mostly desensitized, media-saturated adolescents—[who] grow (up) to attain sober recognition of their plight'" (Schneider 1999, 74). In these films, the characters often humorously comment on the slasher genre conventions, including tropes centered on race (like *Scream 2*) before being murdered. Nevertheless, the neo-stalker film still maintained the integral role of the final girl.

In Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, the seminal text that defined the final girl, she states,

> The final girl is boyish. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine –not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity … 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. (2015, 40)

All of this is to say that the white final girl projects white masculinity in a way that enables her to outwit, outrun, and out-brutalize the killer. She is literally not like other girls… or guys. Since Clover's text, many scholars have questioned not only the gender binary associated with the final girl, like Jeremy Maron (2015), but also how race figures into these depictions, such as Kinitra Brooks (2014). In the films I mentioned, all the white final girls have a feminine, socially savvy Black best friend. She has the common sense to be hesitant in dangerous situations yet is also secure in expressing her sexuality. Building on the neo-stalker genre, she often comments when something nonsensical happens, and because of her counter-position to the white final girl, her Black femininity ruptures the standard pattern of why the white final girl gets to be the final girl. As such, the racial stereotyping of the Black best friend and her racial, gendered excess destabilizes the final girl paradigm, like in *Scream 2* and *Freddy vs. Jason*, or

it fully ruptures this pattern with their survival like in *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer (ISKWYDLS)* and *Hell Fest*.

Nicole Fleetwood writes in *Troubling Vision*, "Within classic visual narratives or historical discourses … black women are produced through visual signs in excess of idealized white femininity … the black woman as excess establishes the boundaries for normative codes of the white female body and femininity" (2011, 111-112). Thus, in pairing the white final girl who displays idealized masculine traits in an idealized white female body next to the Black best friend who is in excess, my work here thinks through how this pairing operates within the slasher villain/final girl dichotomy. Using scholars like Fleetwood, bell hooks, Donald Bogle, among others I argue that not only does abject Black femininity disrupt this dichotomy, but the critical and resistant gazes each of these characters use as they face the villain or question their friends works to offer an oppositional reading of the slasher film and the Black woman's place within it that goes beyond the tongue-in-cheek meta of the neo-stalker film type, and that showcases a sense of power that can go beyond the final girl.

Robin R. Means-Coleman writes in *Horror Noire* that Black women in 1970s Blaxploitation films were enduring women rather than the masculinized final girls. "Black women were often highly sexualized, with seduction and sexual obtainability serving as a principal part of their cache of armaments. Much like the white Final Girl, Black women stare down death; however, the threat is not some indestructible boogeyman; rather … their battle is often more systemic with racism" (2023, 73). Unlike the enduring women in blaxploitation films of the 1970s, the women in these slasher films are not fighting against structural oppressions. Instead, they fight for their own life beside the white final girls and against the confines of stereotypical generic tropes rooted in racism that restrict them to roles such as the sassy best friend/sidekick of the final girl. They fight and sometimes they win and survive, but sometimes they succumb to the killer and to the generic tropes that kill them. However, because of their traditional alignment with enduring women of the seventies, these women are also able to puncture the filmic tropes and endure beyond their stereotypical function.

When I watch Hallie, Karla, Kia, or Brooke level their gaze onto the villain or their friends, I know they are not just eventual bodies for the villain to claim or for the final girl to cry over. They are sites of egress, a ripple and break in the white phallocentric configuration of the final girl. Their abject forms of dark femininity reconstruct the final girl paradigm through their bodies and their gaze, which challenge not only the ideal final girl but the violent, malformed

masculinity of the slasher villain. Even when they do claim her as a victim, her stereotypical presence, when read oppositionally, troubles the slasher conventions. Her gaze, her words, and body, in the end, become more effective than a knife, a machete, or a chainsaw; more cutting and even more transformative.

## You're *F.I.N.E*: Character Juxtapositions

*Scream 2* follows Sidney Prescott, attending college and dealing with the trauma from the previous film. Yet, this does not stop her self-assured roommate and friend, Hallie, from encouraging her to attend parties and sorority events. Even going so far as to declare that when Sidney says she's "fine" what she really means is "Fucked up. Insecure. Neurotic. And Emotional." These four words describe the state of every final girl protagonist mentioned in this work. Compared to their Black counterpart, each white protagonist is considered less confident and less socially savvy than their friends. Of course, considering the bulk of films covered here are sequels or part of running franchises where the final girl has already survived once, it makes sense that Sidney and the like are too disturbed to participate in college activities. However, even the 2018 film *Hell Fest*, a standalone film at the time I'm writing this, repeats this dynamic between the white and Black female protagonists.

Unlike the white final girls, the Black best friends, at the start of the movie, are actually fine. They are emotionally secure and self-possessed, and throughout the films, they offer continual comfort and assurance, doing the work of best friend, dating coach, and therapist. Their protective yet brash personalities lend themselves to type-casted depictions of Black women as "sassy" or aggressive. In an essay on tokenism, Megan Ruby writes, "Men and women of color are used as tokens by perpetuating a stereotype of the white imagination of how people of color act in the ways white people expect them to. There is also a Black female or male character that is there to be sassy and used to further the storyline of the white main character" (2020, 2). Within these films, the Black women can be seen as token Black characters juxtaposed against the final girl and others within the friend group.

Historically, the Black best friend trope has its roots in early Hollywood films depicting Black racist stereotypes. The female Black best friend, however, is of a particular hybrid. Part Mammy and part Jezebel, she comforts, advocates, and defends the white final girl from male society at large, as is shown in the films I discuss here, but she is also the dark sexual projection of white fears. In

Donald Bogle's work, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, he discusses Black stardom within the highly racialized and stereotypical roles Black celebrities found themselves in and illustrates the roles that Black actors portrayed in Hollywood. For example, with the Mammy stereotype, he writes that the "Mammy is distinguished… by her sex and fierce independence. She is usually big, fat and cantankerous" (2001, 9). She also, in the offshoot Aunt Jemima stereotype, is ready and willing to offer a shoulder for a white person to cry on (153). This characterization somewhat follows the role of the Black best friend; she is fiercely independent with a personality described as a "bad attitude." She is also often depicted physically comforting the final girl. In fact, in every film I discuss here, there is a scene where the white final girl reaches for physical comfort from the Black best friend, whether it is through laying her head on her shoulder, wrapping her in a hug, or holding on tightly to her arm when out in public. When being a seemingly exhaustive source of physical and emotional comfort for the final girl, the Black best friend character is shown to be the revamped sexy trope of the original Mammy stereotype.

Additionally, in housing the Mammy trope within the young, attractive body of a Black woman, the Black best friend also plays into the Jezebel character type. Although Bogle never mentions the term Jezebel in describing Nina Mae McKinney as the movie's first "black whore," he states that her "hands on the hips, the hard as nails brassy voice –became stock in trade for black leading ladies" (33). The idea of the "black whore" whose personality is read into the sensuality, sin, and confidence that her body resembles is characteristic of the Black Jezebel. Religious scholar Tamura Lomax reads the Black Jezebel in relation to White femininity stating that "Proper ladies were marked by their color, lineage, dress, labor (or lack thereof), leisure, assumed morality, socioeconomic class, and free status. Jezebels were marked by their blackness, their parentage, near nudity, physical and sexual labor, supposed immorality, deficit of decency, and enslaved status" (2018, 24). Now, the Black best friend is not an enslaved person, but her marked sexuality, excessive femininity, and assumed immorality when it comes to sex are showcased as a stark opposition to the white final girl in slasher films.

Additionally, when keeping in mind the phallocentric mythology that occurs within the slasher film, their outgoing characterizations are what set them apart from the easy death of the other type-casted friends and from the final girl herself. Kinitra Brooks declares that "the coping mechanisms black women developed to deal with their multiple oppressions become a detriment to this particular characterization in contemporary horror. For the black woman's displays of strength are read pejoratively even as the strength of the [white] final

girl is read as positive… an expression of independent initiative, and not a series of acts threatening castration" (2014, 454). These characteristics are often read pejoratively as "attitude" because the strength of Black women is not gained through obtaining an idealized masculinity, which is how slasher films have often been read regarding the white final girl.

Typically, in slasher movies, the friends of the final girl are depicted in filmic tropes that dictate who they are in relation to the protagonist such as slut, drunk, or jock. As Clover writes, "The Final girl of the slasher film is presented from the outset as the main character…She is the Girl Scout. The Bookworm. Unlike her girlfriends, she is not sexually active...The final girl is also watchful to the point of paranoia" (2015, 39). Furthermore, when thinking of the majority of these films, which are sequels, Alexandra West states that for the final girls of the 1990s, "their personal histories were the sites of horror; something they either created or were born into" (2016). As such, with all of these films, the white protagonists' horrors are centered around their own traumas and hang-ups around college, sex, and their past. Though this watchfulness aided final girls in the early film cycles, for the first half of these films, being anxious and paranoid does nothing for them, and this is sharply contrasted with the Black best friend.

For instance, in *Scream 2*, Sidney is unable to enjoy the sorority party as Hallie pledges Delta Lambda, and she has a near panic attack during her theatre rehearsals when she thinks she sees someone in a Ghostface mask. At the beginning of *ISKWYDLS*, the final girl, Julie, wakes up screaming in the middle of her class after dreaming of the killer, and when she is encouraged by her best friend Karla to go out to a club, she panics, thinking she can see the hook-handed killer upstairs. This happens again in *Freddy vs Jason*. At the beginning of the film, the protagonist, Lori, holds a small gathering with her friends at her house. But it is her friend Kia who encourages her to have fun and enjoy herself at her own house.

Finally, in *Hell Fest*, though Natalie has not experienced a traumatizing event like her final girl predecessors, she acts in similar ways. When Natalie finally brings herself to visit her friend, Brooke, after isolating herself away from her during the school year, she is discomforted to realize that Brooke is rooming with Taylor, another member of the friend group, who calls Natalie "Grade School," presumably as a nod towards the Girl Scout trope to which Clover makes reference. In all of these films, the final girl is demonstrated to be both reluctant to participate in normal social mores and overly cautious to the point of nearly separating herself from her peers.

As such, the presence of Hallie, Karla, Kia, and Brooke acts not only as the lure to get the final girl to participate in what is considered "risky behavior" in the slasher genre, i.e. going to social events where a killer might be lurking, but they are juxtaposed to the final girls often guarded and anxious energy. As Clover stated above, it is usually the other girls in the group that are willing to have sex or drink, which puts them at oppositional ends of the personality spectrum with the final girl and closer to their own demise. But the Black best friend does not fit into the easy categories of slut, drunk, jock, or Girl Scout. She is confident with her own sexuality, confident in herself around others to demand adherence to her boundaries, usually successful in school, and able to experience transgressive activities like parties without feeling guilt or paranoia. The brashness of her personality is also, as Kinitra Brooks stated above, part of "coping mechanisms black women developed to deal with their multiple oppressions" (2014, 454). In the world of the slasher genre, the Black best friend's characterization not only helps her deal with the patriarchal and misogynistic narrative within which she operates but also helps the white final girl deal with this narrative as well.

The typical loud, confident brashness of the Black best friend is a photo negative of the much more subdued and watchful white final girl. In *Double Negative* Racquel Gates theorizes her notion of negative Black images as stemming from the concept of a photographic negative, "in which the positive image is considered normal (or in the case of media, normative) and a negative is the complete inversion of that image … just as a negative is necessary for the production of a photograph [I argue] that the negative image is a necessary component for the production of the 'positive' images that circulate throughout popular culture and scholarship." (2018, 17). Considering this concept within the slasher genre, the Black best friend is the literal photo negative of the white final girl. She speaks up for herself, asserts herself, and can defuse situations with humor where the final girl cannot. She embodies the stereotypical qualities of the hypersexual, sassy, Black woman (improper) because the white Final girl embodies the masculinized traits of stoicism and vigilance in a body marked as virginal and untouched (proper), which then makes it possible to survive the killer. The final's girl's relation to positive/normative representation opposes the excessive negative representation of assertive Black femininity. Yet this excessive negative representation demonstrates a power over the narrative, a level of control in the phallocentric world around them that threatens castration with every daring quip and move.

Markedly, in *Scream 2*, Hallie is never without a retort that cuts down either the men or male authority figures around her and Sidney. For example,

when Hallie attends a party, Mickey, who is later revealed to be a part of the killer duo stalking Sidney, asks her to dance, she replies, "Oh, I'd love to… with that tall, wide-shouldered fraternity boy. Think you can arrange that?" She can assert herself as a capable woman who can rebuff unwanted attention. This personality of being able to handle herself while also being protective of Sidney is shown later in the film. After Randy, Sidney's friend, is murdered and the police want Sidney to be on her own, Hallie snaps at them, "I'm her therapist!" so that she can accompany her. Without a phallic weapon, Hallie can establish herself over the male authority figures around them. Her character, in this sense, is more effective than the final girl. The final girl can only dominate the slasher villain when she obtains a phallic weapon, and the slasher villain can only dominate others because of their phallic weapon (Clover, 2015, 47). Conversely, the Black best friend can dominate conversations and establish her authority without the need for this violent, phallic agency.

In *Freddy vs. Jason*, Kia acts similarly. Lori, our protagonist, faces unwanted and persistent advances from Lindermann, and it is often Kia who has to fend him off throughout most of the film. Karla, in *ISKWYDLS*, directs her own boyfriend to take Julie out dancing to make her feel better and then defends Julie against him later when he calls Julie crazy. Finally, in *Hell Fest*, Brooke consistently reassures Natalie about the Halloween actors at the event and even goes to confront one (who is actually the killer) when it goes too far.

Consequently, none of the final girls in these films have the wherewithal to face down an annoying guy who wants their number, much less a killer, until the end of the movie. If the castration of the main villain is the eventual goal, then the characterization of these Black women and their threatening acts of castration have already punctured the phallocentric narrative in the filmic world. Housed in historical and racist tropes of the mammy and jezebel, these films showcase that the Black best friend takes up the negative and improper traits of strength and assertiveness, that enable them to survive… for most of the film, that is.

## Why Make it With Her? : Black Feminine Sexuality

One of Carol Clover's most commonly cited analyses of the final girl is that when she finally kills the villain, it is because she has unmanned him and taken on the phallocentric lack that he has, and used his phallus (knife, chainsaw, or machete) against him (49). Clover further states,

> Figuratively seen, the Final Girl is a male surrogate …it is only for purposes of signifying male lack, and even that meaning is nullified in the final scenes…The discourse is wholly masculine,…She is simply an agreed-upon fiction and the male viewer's use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies. (2015, 53)

Of course, this reading of slasher films adheres to a gender binary that presupposes that the audience is usually male and the survivor is always a woman, aspects of Clover's reading that have been challenged by scholars like Jeremy Maron. However, reading the phallocentricity of slasher films is still prevalent in current discourses, as well as in this paper. The white final girl, in all of her prudish boyishness, is often read as a stand-in for males, which is why she can survive and usurp the slasher villain. However, with Hallie, Karla, Kia, and Brooke, their feminine sexuality is supposedly unrestrained. They go out with guys and purportedly have sex free of the straitlaced constraints the final girl has put on herself. Yet, unlike others in the friend group, none of the Black women in these movies are seen actually having sex. Their *perceived* sexuality (willingness to go to parties, flirt with boys, talk freely about sexual desire and have boyfriends instead of careful pining crushes that keep them at a safe distance from the opposite sex) is in contrast to the final girl, and it is used as a signifier of deviant sexual excess.

When we look at them, the audience is supposed to note that while the final girl does not have sex, they (the best friend) surely must have sex. In *Troubling Vision*, Fleetwood notes that there is an "irresolvability of the black female body as troubling presence in dominant visual culture. It is not a problem that can be 'fixed' through proper dressing or rendering oneself invisible" (2011, 122). Although the Black women in these films are not engaging in excessive acts of sexuality, they are still perceived to be doing so. Their bodies are in contrast to the final girl, who finds discomfort in sexual subjects, while these Black women do not. Though Fleetwood's work centers on Black women's artistic renderings of themselves, for this research, I look at how this ambivalent excess is figured in the slasher film and how their "[r]acialized hypersexuality …threatens the social fabric of white heteronormativity" within these particular films (Fleetwood, 2011, 131). The perception of sexual excess in these movies references how dominant white culture views Black women while also undermining the generic narrative pattern of the slasher film. It is because they are too much, too sassy, too sexual, too feminine, too masculine, too aggressive, too black that their very presence disrupts the slasher genre as a whole.

In *Scream 2*, though Hallie does not survive her run-in with the killer, her presence destabilizes the usual generic patterns within the slasher genre. For instance, Hallie's goal is to be a part of the Delta Lambda Sorority on campus. Slasher films historically do not like sororities, as was the case with one of the first Western slasher films, *Black Christmas* (Clark 1974), where a killer terrorizes a sorority. Not only do sororities represent overt femininity, but over time, they have been stereotyped as being sites of explicit female sexual transgression. Yet, in the scenes where a member of the sorority, Cici, is taunted and then killed, Hallie is absent from this spectacle of murder. Despite her race, gender, and proximity to explicit female sexuality, Hallie is only killed because of her proximity to Sidney, not because of other aspects that a slasher film would find to be deviant and in need of culling. Her racial and gendered excess as a Black woman subverts the genre pattern, she is approximate to transgressive sexuality and more comfortable in her feminine sexuality, but it is not what kills her. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in *Freddy vs. Jason*. With Kia, just like Hallie, there is an assumption that she is more sexually available than Lori. This assumption is articulated when Lori has a Krueger-induced nightmare about her friends. In her dream, she witnesses her friends talking about needing to offer Kruger or Jason a virgin sacrifice (her), and Kia asks why Will (Lori's first love) would "want to make it with someone like her when he can fuck someone like me?" Kia and Will then share a heated glance before Will looks at Lori and says, "Let's tie the bitch up!" This nightmare scene illustrates how one of Lori's biggest fears isn't Kruger or Jason killing, her but her best friend, who is Black, being able to successfully seduce her first love. In hooks' chapter, "Eating the Other," she states,

> [a] racialized sexual encounter is a conversion experience that alters one's place and participation in contemporary cultural politics. The seductive promise of this encounter is that it will counter the terrorizing force of the status quo that makes identity fixed… a condition of containment and death (2015, 23).

Lori's nightmare demonstrates how Kia's body represents a seductive lure that could potentially tempt Will, who represents white cis-heteronormativity, away from her. Kia's body, in this sense, is just as scary as the main antagonist's because of the potential transgressing of racial boundaries and moving past a fixed identity of white boy/white girl coupling. The excess of her body troubles the narrative trope of the young white couple getting together in the end, but only in the nightmare. Once Lori wakes up, the troubling potential of Kia and

Will's "getting together" is "solved." Robin Wood writes about the American horror film, "One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its reemergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, … the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression" (2018, 79). Black female sexuality then is a disrupter to the ideal happy ending of the slasher film, where the deviancy of sexual transgression from the villains, as well as some of the victims, is cut through, and white hetero-patriarchy is restored.

Following this, there are other instances where Kia and her perceived sexual excess destabilize the white heroine narrative. Toward the end of the movie, Freddy locks Jason in a nightmare of him drowning. The friends have Jason's writhing body in the back of the van, and if the drowning gets too bad for Jason, Kia must give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation so he can fight Freddy. What follows is a suspenseful moment of Kia kneeling over Jason as the audience wonders, "Will she put her mouth on him?" She doesn't. But in this scene her body, and specifically her mouth, would have been used to revive one weapon (Jason) to use against Krueger.

In this sense, her physical form is enacted as a potential instrument to help render the slasher villain useless, which would then render the figure of the final girl as the sole heroine also useless. Kia does not have to take up a phallic object like a knife or a machete to disable the killers. In this scene, her body is enough to trouble the phallocentric mythos surrounding the narrative of this slasher film. Of course, because she does not resuscitate Jason or fuck Will, she *almost* destabilizes the overall pattern of the chaste white final girl wielding a phallic symbol at the killer. Yet even this *almost* signifies how the presence of Black women unsettles the generic patterns here.

Furthermore, in thinking of the way Black female sexuality ruptures slasher films, it also helps to look at the women who survived, such as Karla and Brooke in *ISKWYDLS* and *Hell Fest*. In the former, Karla takes on the familiar tropes of the more sexually experienced friend. Not only does she tell Julie to invite a guy with them for their trip to the Bahamas, but she also invites her own boyfriend, Ty. Throughout the remainder of the film, the audience watches Ty unsuccessfully try to have sex with Karla. These scenes create moments of comedy and showcase how Karla's character goes against the sexually experienced friend trope. As well as the representations of Black women as always sexually available, as hooks notes in *Black Looks*, writing, "the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, [or] sexually deviant" (2015, 66). However, whenever they are not

being interrupted, Karla successfully maneuvers herself away from his intentions and usurps expectations around her perceived sexuality.

For example, in the hotel, Julie and Karla have rooms next to each other. At one point, Julie thinks she can hear Karla and Ty having sex, yet when the camera pans to Karla's room, she is jumping up and down on the bed above her boyfriend, talking about her plans in college to change her major to finance and take over Wall Street. This moment in the film utilizes Karla's body as a subversion of expectations, detailing to the viewer that, unlike other friends of other final girls, Karla will not be going out easily. This is demonstrated towards the end of the movie. Instead of being stabbed by the hooked-handed man, she is chased, beaten up, and brutalized, much like the final girl. The film structures her character more like the white final girl. Although she could have sex and is perceived as sexually available, she abstains either through her own interventions or those of others. Due to this, she is not "penetrated" by the killer. Thus, she survives. It could be argued that the star power of Karla and Kia, played by R&B star Brandy Norwood and member of Destiny's Child, Kelly Rowland respectively, prevented explicit scenes of nudity or sex to protect their image as musical artists. Yet, characters like Hallie and Brooke, who are not played by famous musical artists, are rendered in parallel ways that hint at their perceived and excessive sexuality as well, without showing scenes of sex.

For instance, with Brooke in *Hell Fest*, though she is seen throughout the film cuddling, kissing, and being romantic with her boyfriend, she is not seen as sexually deviant or transgressive as the others in the friend group. For example, one friend, Taylor, and their romantic partner consistently speak of sexual activities and are playfully spanked by one of the haunt actors. There is even a moment where Taylor volunteers to participate in a fake beheading ceremony during the event where they need to "sacrifice" a virgin, and she jokingly announces how she might not qualify for this role. This scene, in particular, is when the killer chooses her to be the next victim.

Brooke, on the other hand, while partaking in sexual activities with her boyfriend, is not singled out in the same manner as Taylor is. In the end, when the killer hunts down the two best friends through a haunted house attraction, Brooke does not take up any phallic object to make up for her lack. Notably, the final girl, Natalie, hands Brooke a long stick as they hide from the killer, but Brooke never uses it. She doesn't have to. When the killer comes upon them, Natalie beats him up with a bone decoration used in the haunted house and then, at the end, stabs him with his own blade. Brooke survives even as she partakes in sexual activities. She survives even when she doesn't take up the phallic weapons intended to wound and maim the killer.

Without lack, none of the Black women mentioned in these films have to take up the phallocentric narrative tropes. Their perceived sexuality ruptures the encoded narrative of the slasher film. On one hand, this could be because Black women in popular representations are coded as masculine and aggressive. Therefore, they do not need to gain the phallic symbolism seen within the slasher. However, in these films, Black women are coded in contradictory ways, still acting as the excessive feminine foil of the final girl. It is through this representation that their bodies, how they do or do not use them, work to unsettle the genre.

## Her Eyes are Fucking With You: The Cutting Gaze

In every single one of the films mentioned, the Black best friend has a moment where she stares down the villain or or expresses an incredulous look that questions the logic of the final girl. The latter look is common in the self-referential neo-stalker films. Yet when levied by Black women, whose character is already stereotyped as excess and whose form is already inconsistently figured in the genre, it becomes oppositional. When Randy, a white male character in *Scream 2*, looks, his look is poking fun at the killer, poking fun at movies themselves, such as when he tries to figure out who the killer could be in a sequel. When Hallie does it, she's questioning the logic of the film itself, she's questioning her own survivability in relation to the final girl, as seen before her death. Her look becomes more than comedic self-referentiality and instead places her in opposition to the final girl, the villain, and the genre itself.

She looks rather than becomes the bearer of the phallocentric look, as women in film often are (Mulvey, 1975, 11). These looks are not only resistant to what is happening in front of them but resistant to the genre itself, even when they, Hallie and Kia, inevitably succumb to the operations of the genre. hooks states of the oppositional gaze, "black women [are] able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of the phallocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator … As critical spectators, black women looked from a location that [is] disrupted" (2015, 122-123). From their disrupted locations within the films themselves, these Black women employ a cutting and oppositional gaze that looks at and criticizes the filmic conventions by which they are simultaneously being constrained. Even as the genre attempts to victimize them, their gaze, leveled at the film and the antagonist, cuts through and disrupts. Consequently, we, as spectators, further

identify with their own spectating of the genre as their oppositional gaze matches our own.

The women who survive, Karla and Brooke, each face down the killer on their own, surviving their encounter through sheer strength of will. This will, however, plays into the myth of Black women as superhuman. Kinitra Brooks explains, "This mythology includes the 'problematic assumptions' that strong Black women are the stark and deviant opposites of weak and appropriately feminine white women, that strength is a natural quality of Black women" (2014, 467). In the slasher films in which the Black best friend survives, both Karla and Brooke survive injuries that would have realistically killed other characters, like being thrown through glass from a great height or wounded with an axe.

In *ISKWYDLS*, after realizing they are stranded on the island with a potential killer, the group splits up to run away. Karla falls through the floor and into a greenhouse, where the killer approaches her. Julie helps her in this scene by pulling her towards safety, but when the killer shows up again, he throws Karla through a glass door, and she is presumed dead. In both of these interactions with the killer, her suffering is prolonged as she tries to evade the killer and is repeatedly thrown around, thrown through glass, and harmed, yet she is never stabbed and killed by the phallic object. When she is pinned under the murderous gaze of the killer, she is made into an object, but when she stares back and eventually survives, her subjectivity is returned and affirmed. In the end, when Julie and her boyfriend are seemingly the only survivors, Karla suddenly appears, limping, with the sun streaming behind her. As Julie breaks away from her boyfriend to hug her, Karla says, "You don't have to worry about me, I'm made of steel." Being "made of steel" explains how Karla survives falling through the floor and being thrown through glass multiple times in her efforts to get away from the killer. While this trope is problematic and leads to the othering and oftentimes monstrosity of Black women in media representations in the pattern of the slasher genre, it enables the Black woman to face the killer, often multiple times and sustaining various injuries, and survive.

Although this representation of Black women as superhumanly strong is a harmful image, in the context of surviving a killer without having to take up some phallic weapon or object, it represents a powerful, oppositional image. By playing on the tropes of Black women's representations as both highly sexual (though Karla doesn't sleep with anyone) and strong, Karla's representation in the slasher genre upends and subverts the final girl/slasher villain dichotomy. She survives because she is a Black woman, and her survival is even more notable when, in the very end, the final girl Julie is attacked by a hook-handed

killer in her home. With this last scene, the movie shows that Karla is, technically, the *only* final girl.

*Hell Fest* also has a Black woman survive the trials of being a final girl, and just like her 1998 predecessor, Brooke also has an early showdown with the killer. As the friend group playfully strolls around the horror theme park, Natalie is the only one who notices that one of the horror actors seems to be stalking them. When the killer steals Natalie and her date's photobooth pictures, the one who goes to confront the stalker is Brooke, and she follows the killer into a dark, isolated area. Following Karla's "I'm made of steel," Brooke demonstrates a willingness to face down a threat, even before knowing that it is the killer. In seeking him out, instead of the other way around, Brooke intends to pin him with her gaze, even though he is nowhere to be found in the dark area. Though her bravado and piercing gaze shift in the end to where she is made object under the killer's stare and also wounded with an axe, she still never has to regain a phallic object to live. Her initial bravado still punctured him, and her friend finished him off, enabling her survival.

Although Hallie and Kia do not survive their ordeal, their oppositional gazes within the film still work to cut through the genre form of the slasher film. In *Scream 2*, police officers attempt to drive Sidney and Hallie to a safe location, but Ghostface murders the officers while hijacking the car, and it crashes, resulting in an unconscious Ghostface. Sidney decides to check the body of Ghostface while Hallie states repeatedly, "Don't do it. Don't touch him." Much like how a spectator watching the movie would react, Hallie's critical gaze takes her out of the movie for a moment and remakes her into a spectator, a highly critical Black female spectator. After they crawl over Ghostface's body and run away, Sidney wants to run back and unmask him. Hallie then states, "No, stupid people do that, and we're smart, we should run and get the fuck out of here!" In this sense, her gaze on Sidney, a gaze that aligns with the audience, makes Sidney the bearer of the critical gaze.

bell hooks writes, "Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see." (2015, 117). Hallie is unmoored from the structures of the movie and critically assesses her best friend's logic. Not only is this look oppositional to the slasher genre, but it creates a moment where we look at her looking and are aligned with her spoken thoughts. *We* wouldn't do that. *We* wouldn't go back. This alignment with the audience creates a space of agency for Hallie outside the narrative of the film. But this agency is immediately cut down when Ghostface pops up behind her and kills her, kills her for looking oppositionally.

A corresponding moment of rupture happens in *Freddy vs. Jason*. The final showdown between the kids and the killers happens at Camp Crystal Lake. When Kia escapes into the woods, she sees Freddy chasing Lori and Will. In the scene, we see Lori and Will holding on to each other while trying to escape Freddy Kruger's advances, and it is only Kia's voice that halts him. The camera cuts from the scared, shivering couple to a close-up on Kia's face. Blood drips from her mouth, her face is sweaty, but her gaze is determined as she calls Freddy's name and gets him to pursue her instead of the couple. At this moment, Kia saves not only the final girl but also Will.

He advances towards Kia and says, "How sweet, dark meat." Kruger makes her the object of his homicidal and racialized desires as he approaches her. If he had killed her at this moment, it would have been a confirmation of his phallocentric gaze impaling her. The camera pans out, showcasing Freddy on the left and Kia on the right as they size each other up. Freddy inches closer, snapping his knife fingers at Kia, and the camera zooms in on his face and teeth, showing his perverse hunger for her. Yet, she snaps back at him. "You're not even scary, you're not even scary!" The camera then shows a close-up of her face, of the delight in her eyes, as she mocks him with her hands in the air. This is where the dynamic shifts, where his assaultive gaze is turned back on him, just as his words are.

Kruger, in the slasher villain canon, is one of the more talkative villains. His words work to violate his victims just as his knife fingers do. However, Kia mocks him with a homophobic remark. "Tell me something, what kind of fa***t runs around in a Christmas sweater? You're not even scary! And let's talk about the butter knives, you trying to compensate for something? Maybe coming up a little short there between the legs, Mr. Kruger?" As soon as she comments on his genitalia, the epicenter of the slasher narrative, he backs away. The camera zooms back out to show that Kia is the one advancing upon him, and he is the one who inches backwards. With this scene, we also see that Freddy Kruger and Kia are about the same height, de-emphasizing his monstrosity by showcasing that they are eye level with each other, enough so that Kia does not have to look up to cut him with her gaze; all she has to do is look forward. Kia's use of a homophobic slur, while clearly problematic, works in the context of the slasher genre to stress the heteronormative masculine lack that all the slasher villains attempt to make up for with their phallic weapons. As such, she violates him with her words and challenging gaze.

Instead of taking up the phallic weapon, Kia's gaze and words cut through the phallocentric narrative by openly mocking it. She objectifies, questions, and mocks his maleness, and under her gaze, he shrinks; under her

comments, the silly, phallocentric narrative of the slasher genre is revealed. Her look becomes assaultive to Kruger and to the genre as a whole. Clover writes, "horror movies are obsessively interested in the thought that the simple act of staring can terrify, maim, or kill its object –that a hard look and hard penis are one and the same" (2015, 182). Though Kia's remarks and looks maim Krueger at this moment, she is not the masculinized final girl. As shown in the above sections, Kia is still rendered as excessively feminine, and though she "outmans" Kruger here, her next words seal her fate. She declares, "I mean you got these teensy-weensy little things, and Jason's got this big ol' thing". As soon as she recognizes who has the bigger phallic weapon, Jason appears and kills her. Clover further asserts that assaultive gazes are always eventually punished within the horror movie paradigm (2015, 187). With this, though Kia's taunts and gaze puncture through Freddy's defenses, her assaultive and critical gaze does not ensure her survival.

These Black women do not adhere to the strict dynamic of the final girl dichotomy that demands obtaining phallic agency. Instead, through their razor-like scrutiny and willingness to stare down oppositional forces, they are positioned outside of the phallocentric narrative and aligned with the spectators watching, specifically Black women spectators who continuously question the logic of slasher films. Even when they die, the looks of Black women are able to shift their reality and the reality of the film, exposing the sinew, nerves, and bones of the genre.

## Conclusion: The First Weapon

I'm going to return to Maureen Evans, sitting alone in the theatre. Something about her death always bothered me. After critiquing the logic of the movie, Ghostface appears, and she is stabbed to death in front of a crowd of cheering people dressed in Ghostface masks. She is punished for her oppositional gaze and made an example of. Nonetheless, Maureen Evans levels the first blow at the slasher film genre. She is the first weapon.

Throughout these films, Black women, because of their historical representations of excessive deviant femininity, are sites of rupture in the general slasher formula even as they play into the neo-stalker trend. Their feminine Blackness puts them at odds with the representations of prudish white femininity, and this fraught location allows their personalities, perceived sexuality, and gaze to oppose the slasher villains in ways the white final girl cannot. It is because of their position (Hallie, Karla, Kia, Brooke, and yes, even

Maureen Evans) as the already othered, the already castrating, that they cause a breach within the film. Essentially, the negative representations that have been heaped onto the Black woman's body are their armor and weapons within the genre.

Before she dies, Maureen watches a character in *Stab* and critiques her, "If that was me, I would be out of there!" Maureen connects with the audience by projecting herself onto the screen, and we, as a result, see ourselves in her. Nina Cartier writes in "Black Women On Screen as Future Texts", "As viewers … we scour the screens searching for images that both reflect our lived experiences and offer new possibilities to free ourselves from …our daily existences. We search for some small, tangible artifact as evidence not only that we exist …but also that we matter (2014, 152). When I watch these Black women on screen and see the ways their representation, steeped in stereotypes, troubles the narrative, I see the power of their characters and the possibilities they bring from disrupted places in the narrative. They may not always be the final girl, but they are usually the first weapon that unsettles the genre of the slasher film. They are both within and outside the narrative, able to be looked at and do the looking. They matter because they reveal the insides of the white phallocentric narrative and cut through them, even when they succumb to this narrative. And, in the end, there is a power in that.

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