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"The mother is upstairs with a cord, a saw, a garbage bag, a black light, and some cleaning supplies." This suggestive line occurs early on in a 1500-word horror story by an 8th grader, who goes on to imagine a series of gruesome deaths in an otherwise ordinary suburban neighborhood. Encouraging students to share their deep knowledge of horror video shorts unlocked a well of creativity in my 8th grade English Language Arts class in a northeastern city. This case study of horror writing explores how student-led culturally responsive genre discovery can connect to existing curricular mandates, affirm student knowledge, and allow for sustained and engaged student work through co-constructed learning that draws on and cultivates the joys of shared fandom.

Creating culturally responsive or relevant pedagogy implicates literacy and literary genres, both in what we allow into the classroom and what we keep out. Classroom texts that help students perceive other cultures and allow them to see themselves are a fundamental part of a culturally responsive literacy classroom (Sims Bishop 1990). A long-standing body of literature affirms the importance and effectiveness of giving students access to diverse texts (Ebe 2010; Tan and Ma 2021). Culturally responsive or relevant pedagogy refers to the entire classroom environment and approach (Ladson-Billings 1995) and has been shown to improve school outcomes in the United States for historically marginalized non-White or low-income students (Cherfas 2021; Dee and Penner 2021; Yu 2022). But finding and igniting interest for students can require moving outside traditional texts and genres. Culturally responsive genre literacy offers a new way of thinking about connecting with students who did not see their out-of-school literacy interests and obsessions reflected in their classrooms.

Recognizing genre in fandoms can be a way to expand texts and voices in the ELA classroom. Genre literacy has also been conceptualized through bringing in texts that are part of fandoms and analyzing fandom culture in the classroom (Jones and Storm 2022, 2023). Fandoms, write Jones and Storm, "are often places that center joy as fans of focal texts share passionate intensities, discuss the text's aesthetic properties, dream up new stories, write themselves into existence, and even shift shared imaginaries" (2023, 2). Even with texts by diverse authors, students may not see their voices and passions reflected in the traditional English classroom, with its focus on academic responses to prescribed texts. Students encounter and transform texts outside the classroom in their fandom communities, however, which offer opportunities for joyful teaching and learning in shared exploration.

Horror, in particular, is a genre that is touched on in school mainly through the works of Poe and in complex literary fiction such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Works devoted to the supernatural and terrifying are everywhere in student's lives—in popular films, comics, and shared oral traditions—and have devoted online fandoms. Moreover, Black horror in film and stories is increasingly seen as a reclaiming of Black American history and experience. As Gabrielle Bellot wrote in

2019 in *The New York Times* about the current cultural prominence of Black horror movies by practitioners such Jordan Peele, "horror is, after all, a safe way to experience our deepest fears without actually having to confront them.... We have the luxury of turning away, of closing our eyes." At the same time, Black horror "seeks to capture the all-too-real fear of walking through America in a Black body and, with ghosts and clones and body-swapping conspiracies, it becomes an intentionally exaggerated, baroque realism" (Bellot 2019). The stories generated in our classroom featured beheadings, blood, and betrayals, fantastical exaggerations of experiences and emotions that are both culturally specific and redolent of adolescence in general. At the same time, since the writers themselves are in control of the narrative, Black and brown youth can experience both mastery of text and of history, writing out of existence the undying "vampires" of racism (Love 2019) and outmoded horror tropes such as Black characters dying first (Corbitt 2023).

Following student insight and genre interests, we discovered joy, curiosity, and shared scholarship through connecting the genre of YouTube horror shorts to the tradition of 19th-century Gothic horror. For context, this case study focuses on students in a "basic skills" class, in which students are reading below grade level, according to district screening tests, yet show passionate and involved reading and writing habits outside these tests. In a unit focused on the appeal of suspense in narrative, students read mysteries and short stories by Edgar Allan Poe and completed literary analyses. While all the students were BIPOC, they did not explicitly address race but created characters who were either like themselves, their families, and their friends in their narratives or were drawn from other fandoms such as anime and *Avatar*. They wrote detailed fictions about school intruders, white vans and haunted houses, and parents and children facing monsters and demons at home and in forests. This paper documents a process for unearthing student genre interest outside stereotypes or pre-existing cultural associations through four guiding principles.

Principle 1: Engage in Constant Youth Ethnography

Be watchful for and encourage student enthusiasm and interest as it bubbles up in relation to existing curriculum.

When I asked what features of horror and suspense students already knew, one student jumped up to ask if they could load a scary video on our classroom monitor. We agreed, as long as it was classroom-appropriate and did not feature body horror. This student's desire to share ignited our "scary story" unit. Other students asked to share their favorite scary shorts. We then collaboratively generated principles of suspenseful stories based on YouTube horror shorts. Students established the following genre and setting features: "A: Night, alone, weird empty space, squeaks and creaks, limited sight of main character OR B: Day, rules that no one can understand, danger if rules are broken." Students then composed their own stories following these features in a process of "restorying" Poe and YouTube horror shorts (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016). I had been alert to the possibility that scary stories might be generative already, however, as I had observed prior students' obsessions with Internet horror shorts, as they surfed their Chromebooks in between classes. Teachers can also formalize this inquiry by asking students to share web, TV, or movie series that they are fans of and unpack together both the meaning of the series and of fandom itself, similar to the "equity trail" procedure articulated by Jones and Storm,

designed to "harness joy and social justice" (2023, 3-4).

Principle 2: Enlist Norm Checkers

These co-ethnographers are often closer in age to students but can be anyone who is embedded in a sub-culture and aware of genre norms.

I was also made aware of the popularity of horror films through two emic observers, my own adolescent children, one of whom had previously shared with me his enthusiasm for YouTube horror shorts. The genre of horror shorts on YouTube and other social channels has several sub-genres as well, according to my co-ethnographer. These include analog horror, which is based on the found footage premise pioneered by the *Blair Witch Project* (1999), and creepypasta, a two-decade-old genre of short, first-person, paranormal Internet stories often shared a low, deadpan voice. While not every teacher has convenient adolescent norm-checkers at home, we do have colleagues and friends; one colleague is a devoted gamer, for instance, and I check in with them on video games students are experiencing as texts outside of school. In addition, once students are aware of teacher openness to expanded genres, students often volunteer their fandoms to offer potential whole-class activities and choices. After our first scary story unit, one student, for instance, introduced me to the vibrant online community of My Little Pony horror, featuring grotesque renderings and infections of the animated ponies. While some fandoms are not youth-appropriate, shared student-chosen genres tend to be within classroom norms, and teachers can articulate boundaries in the co-curation of classroom genres.

Principle 3: Social Media Scan

Look for trends and genres that might bubble up in or connect to the existing curriculum.

Social media such as YouTube and TikTok are valuable data sources, especially as both deliver genre-content similar to the user's initial search, becoming more focused on the same genre the more the user browses that particular content. After skimming just three "creepypasta" videos on YouTube, for example, more started to populate my YouTube homepage. This not only helps keep teachers alert to student interests but also helps make them aware of student language usage. For instance, the subgenre of the "school interview" on TikTok consists of students asking others rapid-fire questions, sometimes of a personal nature, as if in a "man on the street" interview. It has genre-cousins in the hypothetical question or "would you rather" TikToks. These all could be effective genre pairings with more traditional classroom studies of ethics, journalism, or, within fiction, character conflict and dilemmas.

Principle 4: Ensure Students Recognize and Honor Student Genre Passions and Work, With Opportunities for Celebration.

After we generated our principles of horror and suspense through watching YouTube shorts, students created their own stories. Some asked to work in pairs, and several decided spontaneously to illustrate their stories, which featured some grisly scenes but followed classroom guidelines for fiction, in that no real names were used and sensitive plotlines such as self-harm or school shootings were avoided; they had enough inventive material without that. All students in this class wrote their horror stories within the originally scheduled time as well, something that occurred with no other assignment over the marking period. I printed each student's story, and they made

book covers and stapled or sewed the book binding. Students could choose whether they wanted their book displayed in the school hallway, which they all chose to do.

Through engaging in ongoing youth ethnographic research, recruiting norm checkers or emic participants for information, using social media as a data source, and celebrating student fandoms and genre knowledge, teachers are better prepared to understand, respond to, and even propose new classroom genres for students to explore and connect to the existing curriculum. Horror shorts on YouTube helped reinforce and extend ideas of suspense and Gothic horror from our Poe study and engaged students so thoroughly that they not only completed the assignment but were critical to developing it. In the end-of-marking-period survey, five of fourteen students wrote that of all their work, the scary story was the work that they were proud of and that they would like to write more. Alertness to culture outside our classrooms can help us be responsive when students allude to it through their own interests, enthusiasms, and desire to transform or escape their worlds with heightened imaginations.

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