

**WHO MAKES THE HOOD?: THE CITY, COMMUNITY AND CONTEMPORARY
FOLK HORROR IN NIA DACOSTA'S *CANDYMAN***

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From Britain to US

Folk horror is traditionally located in the rural landscape or pastoral settings, where the power of nature creates a sense of isolation compounded by an individual's exclusion from communities, initially defined by a triumvirate of British films — the “unholy trinity” of *Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973) and continued in a second wave of British stories typified by the woodland trilogy of Ben Wheatley's *Kill List* (2011), *A Field in England* (2013), and *In the Earth* (2021), in addition to *The Isle* (2019) and, more recently, the village and woodland settings of Alex Garland's *Men* (2022) and Ben Steiner's *Matriarch* (2022). In folk horror as Adam Scovell defines it, the “folk” of the definition is the ethnographic practices of a people or community, its folklore and superstitions, where the “horror” through which these practices are depicted is “open to fluctuating meaning.” (2017, 6)

In North America, folk horror shares many of the themes with its European counterparts in that stories are often focused on a clash between the modern and the arcane, the ordinary and the uncanny, or “wyrd” – a term Diane A. Rodgers has proposed as a way of describing post-2000 folk horror revival as “eerie, hauntological media with folkloric themes” (2019). The genre is typified by the enemy within and situated in place and the hierarchies of power that govern communities. The genre is commonly located in rural environs — evident in the TV movie *Crowhaven Farm* (1970), and superlative cinematic releases *Children of the Corn* (1984)

and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The religious fervor of British films, whether pagan or puritanical, often shifts focus in North American folk horror to stories that reflect the impact of slavery or colonialism. This is evident in the country's own latest wave of films in the genre, from the early New England puritans of Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), the contemporary settings of Upstate New York in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and coastal small town location of *Us* (2019), to the struggling Oregon town that features in *Antlers* (2021). All of this group of US folk horror films are connected by roots that sit in the black American experience or Native American folklore, rather than calling back to European traditions.

As Dawn Keetley notes, the most important conflict in the genre involves humans and their relationship to their environment. "In folk horror, things don't just happen *in* a (passive) landscape; things happen *because* of the landscape. The landscape does things; it has efficacy." (2015) This convention of folk horror is certainly true of the *Candyman* franchise (1992-) where the central story of each film is evoked by its location and a connection to slavery, and contemporary racism. A twist is presented in the way with which the origins of this action are drawn from a *built* rather than *natural* environment and in an urban, rather than rural, locale. The Candyman character at the center of the story is connected to a past that haunts both the real-life Chicago Cabrini-Green neighborhood in which the legend is born in the film and is recounted by its occupants or those that have fled or been displaced. These themes are common across the original *Candyman* (1992) and, to a lesser extent, in its sequels *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995) and *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* (1999), though DaCosta's is the first film of the franchise to return to the location of the original — Cabrini-Green, and the urban housing projects of Chicago. This connection to a city, rather than a rural location, echoes the franchise's source material — Clive Barker's short story *The Forbidden* (1985) — where graffiti in the Spector Street Estate, a public housing project situated in Liverpool in the UK, is the subject of a study by an academic researcher. In the original story, the action is

contemporary to the book's publication, as the occupants of Spector Street — subjects of institutionalized poverty, a working-class consigned to concrete tower blocks — recount to a visiting sociologist the story of the Candyman, and how they are haunted by him. The impact on communities in folk horror's more traditional rural settings is often shaped by the impact of humans on their environment and the anxiety or tension this predicated. In *Candyman* this tension centers on how the built environment is a force that impacts, restricts, and imposes malevolent power upon its resident communities. In DaCosta's iteration of *Candyman* the change that disrupts the landscape's equilibrium is *rebuilding*. Here redevelopment is the catalyst for anxiety, a residual dread that haunts both landscape and its people.

Each of the stories of the *Candyman* franchise center around a legend of a hook-handed spirit summoned by saying his name five times in front of a mirror, with these summoners then stalked and murdered by him. Each component of the character is born from longstanding legends. The Hookman is a familiar urban legend originating in the US of the 1950s, of an escaped serial killer with a hook for a hand who preyed upon courting couples (Brunvard 2003). Similarly, the notion of summoning a spirit through an incantation made in a mirror is well-established, though originates in a much older tradition, the summoning of Bloody Mary or its Japanese equivalent of Hanako-San (de Vos 2012). The franchise trades on other contemporary urban legends, which are recounted through the narrative, most notably where razor blades are secreted in Halloween candy.

One of *Candyman*'s many strengths is the relocation of the supernatural into this more familiar world — the contemporary situation lessening the distance between the dread of the characters who occupy the film and an audience familiar with stories of city decay, and fearful of crime, poor social housing, oppressive policing and a neglectful central society. In addition to the mythos, part of the storyline has its origins in the true story of Ruth McCoy, a resident of

the Grace Abbot Homes, a Chicago housing authority project, who had called 911 in 1985 reporting that someone had attacked her, having climbed through the bathroom cabinet of her apartment. This home invasion technique had been widely reported in the city before McCoy's experience, facilitated by intruders entering homes by way of the pipe chase that separated each apartment of the block. Although police responded to the call and knocked on McCoy's door, they left when they received no answer — McCoy was found two days later having been shot and killed in her own home (Bogira 2014). This device, of the Candyman occupying and emerging from the walls of apartment buildings is repeated in DaCosta's film, as is the victim's surname recounted through the central protagonist's nomenclature Anthony McCoy (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II).

Spectral Cities: Folk Horror, Urban Legend and the Built Environment

Director Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* embodies the fluidity of the folk horror genre — taking the conventions common to both British and US films defined as the “folk horror chain” by Scovell — combining the rural environment, a sense of isolation, skewed belief systems or morality with a happening or summoning (2017). In this film, all of these elements of the chain are present, with an individual's isolation and brooding fear of others combined with a sense of the past imposed upon the present yet the urban setting breaks the chain and presents a question as to the significance of the rural to folk horror as a genre. A key difference between this latest film, and the original *Candyman*, is that these themes are resituated to a spectral city. DaCosta's story is almost entirely situated in the Cabrini-Green public housing development that featured in the first film of the franchise, with the larger Chicago cityscape serving only as a backdrop to the events that occur in the neighborhood. The neighborhood of 2021 is much diminished, and far from the wealthy areas of the city and subsequently from the reach of authority, or society. Much of the 1957 Cabrini Homes Extension of 15 red brick mid and high-rise

buildings demolished by 2011, together with the William Green Homes. Only the Francis Cabrini Homes, the two-story rowhouses remain, and the principal location for DaCosta's film (Ihejirika 2010). Kier-La Janisse has observed that folk horror can be found “anywhere people [...] displace other people or other cultures, or where older traditions are being transported to new environments” (2021). As Summerisle is to *The Wicker Man*, so DaCosta presents Cabrini-Green as an island, albeit one in which glass and steel tower blocks and creeping gentrification have displaced its occupants and their understanding of themselves rather than water and religion.

What we see of the city is accentuated through how DaCosta chooses to present the city from unusual points of view. These are consistent throughout beginning with the mirror-imaged Universal logo that opens the film and carried through to the inversion of the camera that views the city upside down in the title sequence. This point-of-view presents a disconcerting viewing position for the audience as the camera floats through the city looking up at skyscrapers disappearing into fog rather than down on rooftops and teeming streets from the more traditional helicopter shot. This choice conjures unusual lines and shapes of buildings free of the typical markers of the city — vehicles, pedestrians, and street signage. The effect evokes notions of the satanic witch with the ability to fly or levitate, and the position is disconcerting — in that the camera appears both of the air, in that we cannot see its anchoring in its tilt towards the sky and tower blocks that occupy it, but also strangely grounded in reality in that it doesn't rise or fall, merely floats. In the context of the wider film, this can be read as an othering of the city an *almost* human point-of-view but one which takes an unusual, and newly seeing, perspective of the familiar.

In DaCosta's articulation of the *Candyman* mythos, the stark neighborhoods of Barker's 1980s gothic and Bernard Rose's original film are reimagined in what is now left of the original Cabrini-Green projects following the redevelopment of the district that began in the 1990s

(Guzzardi, 2011). The housing project was one of a number built or expanded in the 1950s and 1960s in Chicago, populated largely with African American residents and poorly funded and maintained by the city authorities (Bogira 2014). Robert Macfarlane describes in an essay on the eeriness of the English countryside that “landscape [...] is never a smooth surface or simple stage-set, there to offer picturesque consolations. Rather it is a realm that snags, bites and troubles” (2015) and this is evident here, recounted in the narrative as to how the area has been policed, and how the nature of the contemporary place is intrinsically linked to its past. This is recounted through a flashback to 1977 when white police officers beat to death a homeless resident suspected of secreting razor blades in candy. This is also made evident in the present day through Anthony’s fear of the police — demonstrated through his hiding from patrolling police cruisers as he explores the two-story rowhouses, all that remains of the original housing development. In folk horror, the landscape is often a contested, liminal, space of the uncanny — situated beyond the ordinary and mundane, but one marked by what has gone before a palimpsest or a shared remembrance of the collective past — buried secrets forming ley lines that connect the present to distant history. *Candyman* occupies a liminal space of a *remembered* real constructed of the mythological and the historical where the original population and their children remain haunted by the mythologies of the place; candy spiked with razor blades, homeless men who live in walls, child abduction, and a suicide.

In *Candyman*, the old ways are never framed as having been right. The ghetto that occupies the geography of Cabrini-Green is now only evident in the empty rowhouses and abandoned church featured in the film — all that remains of the old neighborhood — with principal photography occurring entirely on location in the area (Holmes and Austen-Smith 2021). In DaCosta’s film, Cabrini-Green has become a location manifest only through the mind, where a fractured sense of the past has taken its place rather than through its actualization

through buildings and community — indeed even the name of the neighborhood itself finds itself distended, referred to only as “Cabrini” in several scenes.

The processes of gentrification have purified the location to some extent but is unable to erase its memory so easily — the ground on which the housing project stood carrying a “hauntology” of a cultural past that can never be scrubbed away, and a persistent stain on the lives of those who live there. In a scene that takes place early in the film, contemporary artist Anthony and his gallerist partner Brianna (Treyonah Parris) are questioned by Brianna’s brother Troy (Nathan Stewart-Jarrett) as to why they had purchased their new apartment in a neighborhood troubled by its long history. Troy informs the couple that the area had been known historically as “Smokey Hollow, Little Hell, Combat Alley” before recounting the story of Helen Lyle, a woman accused of kidnapping a child in the 1990s. “The neighborhood is haunted,” says Troy. “Everywhere is haunted” responds Anthony. As Brianna articulates how the original housing projects and their communities have been destroyed through redevelopment, acknowledging Cabrini-Green’s part-replacement by their shining steel and glass apartment block. Troy’s partner Grady (Kyle Kaminsky) observes that Anthony and Brianna are complicit in this destruction having played their part as enablers of the actions of real estate developers. This is made particularly pointed in that Grady is the only white character amongst the otherwise black group in the scene. There is no response to this from the characters in the scene, DaCosta holding the action as each understands the observation to be broadly true. This collective responsibility of the group in the erasure of Cabrini-Green as a place is buried within each individual — Troy in his role as a real estate agent, Brianna and Troy as the new money millennials purchasing apartments within the redevelopment, and Grady as a representative of a white professional class. Each are limited in their responsibility of their accountability in the destruction of the old neighborhood, but the scene serves to remind one another of this shared responsibility in this cleansing.

The moment is akin to those accused of witchcraft by their neighbors in *Witchfinder General*, complicit but choosing individual fear of others — of witchcraft in place of *Candyman*'s crime narrative — over the communal sense of shared social cohesion. Anthony is accused in a similar way later in the film at an exhibition of his artwork. In the scene, the art critic Finley Stephens (Rebecca Spence) suggests that artists — and indirectly Anthony and Brianna — are predators upon, rather than saviors of, working-class communities, presenting the argument that artists' work capitalises upon the representation of poverty for material gain. Finley makes a further accusation that, through the actions of the occupation and subsequent gentrification of communities previously occupied by the working-class that these artists are active through their lived behavior as part of the gentrification process in addition to their artistic practice.

Prompted by Troy's story, Anthony explores what remains of the original Cabrini-Green projects meeting laundromat owner William Burke (Colman Domingo) who recounts to him the origination of the Candyman myth; a hook-handed homeless man named Sherman Fields (Michael Hargrove) who had been unlawfully beaten to death 25 years earlier by police. Later, the film presents the resolution to a pre-title sequence where William, as a child, had encountered Sherman. In the later sequence, William is revealed to have witnessed Sherman's man's murder at the hands of the police officers. This recounting of the story prompts Anthony to begin painting a series of work around the hook-handed figure. Though a playful exchange with Brianna, he conducts the summoning ritual himself as part of a conversation with her — an act that is revealed to have successfully opened the portal for Candyman to haunt Anthony, by way of a brief shot of the city from the point-of-view of the inverted camera that follows the scene. The theme of personal reflection and of having one's true self and intent revealed to oneself is represented literally through the many mirrors within the film used to summon the Candyman, but also in other reflective surfaces — elevators, windows, and vehicles all

revealing his presence. These mirroring spaces form a significant part of the Candyman mythos. Anthony first sees Candyman as he listens to recordings Helen Lyle had made of her studies, with Candyman inverted as a mirror image of Anthony in the ceiling of an elevator. The figure is seen by Anthony a second time almost immediately afterward when he visits Finley Stephens' apartment, prompting Finley to summon Candyman in her bathroom mirror. Anthony is taken by surprise by the spirit, who again mimics his physical actions in a hallway mirror before Anthony leaves and the Candyman kills Finley. This notion is echoed in how characters navigate the filmic world and not just *what* we see of the city but, more importantly, *how* it is revealed to us as an audience. The many interstitial images that break up the story show rail and road intersections, tunnels and subways, bridges, walkways, corridors, and rivers — these liminal, *connective*, spaces are portrayed as malevolent—shown in darkness, absent of people and accompanied by a disconcerting score. They serve a similar purpose to the mirrors and walls that serve as portals connecting the real world of Anthony to its 'wyrd' (Rodgers, 2019) counterpart, occupied by Candyman. Marcus K. Harmes has noted that lingering shots of landscape help to craft the elevated world required by rural horror (2013). These shots both call back to the strange viewing position of the opening titles, in addition, prompting the audience to consider the landscape as one of menace - accentuated by the cyclical score from Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe, itself drawn in part from the landscape — Lowe making use of field recordings made in Cabrini-Green during the shoot (Brown 2021).

Say His Name

Writing about the original *Candyman* film, Mikel J. Koven notes that the very method of summoning the Candyman — repeating his name five times in a mirror — serves as an act of folkloric ostension. The summoning ritual itself is familiar to traditional horror, conducted by characters who face the consequences in each edition of the franchise, but in *Candyman* it is

the recounting of the legend to other characters that presents the film as occupying a folk horror tradition — a passing on of knowledge (1999: 168). The significance of this recounting of the legend is important in understanding the wider connotation of the *Candyman* narrative, where the ritual of telling is more important than the ritualistic summoning — in that the telling of the story — rather than the act of the monster himself — that serves as a mechanism that speaks to lived experience. The significance of the myth is not that of a serial killer with a hook for a hand, but the origins of the myth itself as Anthony comes to discover — initially born of slavery and the practice of lynching, and latterly from the impact on a series of black men of poor social housing projects, the aggressive policing of these neighborhoods, and the fear of predators within the community – whether made manifest through a serial killer or a fear of one’s own mental wellbeing. This mechanism meets Simon J. Bronner’s description of the “folk” of “folk horror” as one of a recounted tradition, bound up in people and carried between groups through both intergroup, and intergenerational, storytelling (2017). Anthony inherits the story from William, before recounting it through his art and exhibitions and effectively prompting the initial summoning and subsequent murders. In the latest film, this retelling of the Candyman narrative shifts in this form of ostension — it is recounted as a story told between characters as in the previous editions of the franchise, but also moves from the physically represented to depicting back story using shadow puppetry deployed both as inserts within the film and in its credit sequences. DaCosta cites artist Kara Walker, whose work recounts black trauma through the medium, as an influence (2021). In the film, these sequences are used in a similar manner to Walker’s work in that the device allows the evocation of historical violence without having to directly depict events. A secondary purpose is the device saves DaCosta of the need to call back to flashbacks to footage from the previous films.

This technique of utilizing shadow puppets as ostension is seeded in the film initially as a profilmic event where William Burke is shown as a child enacting a story of police brutality

using shadow puppets within the film itself. Once introduced however it shifts to a non-diegetic device and illustration of voiceover — first used when Troy recounts to Anthony and Brianna the story of Helen Lyle’s suicide, then as William elaborates on the Candyman legend for Anthony — connecting the ghost to a lineage of murdered black men leading back to 1890s and the lynching of artist Daniel Robitaille. It is women who predominantly suffer following the summoning of this murderous supernatural spirit. It is Brianna’s colleague’s assistant Jerrica (Miriam Moss) who is the first to die, followed by Stephens, and a group of young women who conduct the ritual led by their friend who had visited the exhibition of Anthony’s work. Their suffering is born of male trauma as William explains — the original spirit Robitaille, and subsequent victims of brutality William Bell — who William explains was “lynched in the twenties,” Samuel Evans, who he explains was killed “during the white housing riots of the fifties” and, most recently, Sherman Fields’ murder at the hands of the police. As William explains to Anthony — “a story like that, a pain like that...lasts forever,” suggesting that legends such as Candyman are the manner with which society handles its traumatic history.

These powerful aesthetic choices further accentuate the power of the ostension or, in DaCosta’s own words, to demonstrate how the “telling of the story, is as important as the story itself” (2021). Matilda Groves defines folklore “as the wisdom of the common people,” noting that it is not just the people encountering the uncanny that is important, but that these people are those who “tell the story. They are the story” (2017). In Grove’s reading of the folk horror genre she notes that this retelling through ostension serves to draw an audience further into the story through the purposes of a restricted narrative, where both protagonist and audience gain story information in the same moment. In *Candyman* they is no omniscient narrative - the audience learns of Sherman Fields’ murder and the connection of this event to a Candyman mythos that leads back much further into the past at the same time that the information is revealed to Anthony in its retelling by William. Groves suggests that this device – of ostension

within restricted narrative storytelling - can serve to prevent the othering of the characters within a wider narrative; by being told these stories in the same moment as Anthony the audience joins him to become the folk of this “folklore” (2017).

This notion is consistent with how we experience the film through Anthony as a protagonist. When Anthony is alone, he is commonly in the center of the frame, as are William Burke and Sherman Fields when they are first depicted. Anthony occupies this framing position throughout his two solitary explorations to the rowhouses, in his studio and gallery exhibition sequence, and when he initially hears through a news report of the gallery murders. The framing position is repeated in when we see him visit Stephens’ apartment, in a visit to a hospital, and a subsequent visit to his mother. In each example he is commonly in the center of the frame — the camera either following him, presenting his point of view or, in an echo of how he experiences the mirrored Candyman, in a reverse shot, where we see Anthony facing us as an audience, again in the center of the frame. When Anthony first comes to paint his images of Sherman Fields, the camera again centers him in the frame but, unusually, this time from above his body — an inversion of the opening city sequence, and as though presenting a thought. Throughout, the camera accentuates the audience’s restricted narrative position and serves as a mirror of Anthony’s experience. We see what he sees, or observe him looking at it, often taking the same position occupied by the Candyman in the elevator and hallway mirror sequences. Similarly, the point-of-audition or position from which we hear also often mirrors Anthony’s experience, most notably controlled through the use of headphones in the elevator sequence where Anthony first experiences a manifestation of Candyman.

As Anthony slowly loses his mind, William shifts position in the frame and in the narrative to become the center and principal focus of DaCosta’s film. In the closing sequence, William is revealed to have first seen Candyman as a child, having witnessed his sister’s murder after she had conducted the summoning ritual. By way of revenge, William discloses his plan

to unleash the spirit as a force to reverse the oppression of the community. Following his revelation, Brianna kills William in her attempt to rescue Anthony, but who is subsequently shot dead by attending police officers. As the police officers attempt to coerce Brianna into agreeing that the homicide was justified, she conducts the summoning ritual in their cruiser's rear-view mirror — the Candyman appearing with Anthony's face.

Adam Scovell describes one of the key criticisms of his “Folk Horror Chain” as the emphasis on rural landscape, presenting in a later essay a number of films situated in the urban environment which may otherwise satisfy the criteria – citing the London Underground setting of *Death Line* (1972) as a specific example of what he defines as “Urban Wyrd” (2015). He suggests that one of the key differences between the urban and rural landscape is how the former retracts to create its sense of isolation, while the latter expands. Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* avoids this problem by the manner with which it frames its city. This urban landscape is not viewed horizontally or from above, but from below, looking up to the sky through its floating camera. The manner with which the skyscrapers of the wider Chicago tower over the two-storey rowhouses that embody the continued haunted landscape of Cabrini-Green provides a further twist; a distinctly urban alternative to the more traditional presentation of woodland that contains the threat to the ordered world in Robert Egger's *The Witch*, so beautifully captured in the title of Kier-La Janisse's superlative folk horror documentary *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched*. DaCosta's elegant aesthetic choices provides the necessary expanse within the city blocks, the impact accentuated through a film that expands the liminal spaces so central to its narrative – mirrored surfaces – to the connective tissue of the city; the transport network of roads, railroads, subways, and bridges. Folk horror reflects a lived experience and to exclude urban characters is to deny the understanding of the city as a landscape like any other, one that is capable of presenting a veritable palimpsest of meanings, or memory, of hauntology and is perhaps one more powerful to the audiences contemporary audiences that live within them.

I challenge you. Look in a mirror. Say his name five times. “Candyman, Candyman, Candyman, Candyman...”

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