

## Say it Again: Belief and Narrative Repetition in the *Candyman* Stories

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the use of repetition in Clive Barker’s “The Forbidden” and the four *Candyman* movies inspired by it. Using a folkloric lens rooted in the study of folk beliefs and the repeated rituals and narratives that emerge from them, it explores the power associated with Candyman and his stories. Of particular interest are the unofficial and lived experiences of those who share these tales and how they stand in contrast to the institutions, primarily academic and legal, that dismiss their validity and, consequently, the associated communities. Finally, this paper focuses on the subversive power of Candyman emerging from ritual repetitions to further destabilize official power structures and narratives as he seeks to negotiate his own identity.

**Keywords:** *Candyman*, “The Forbidden”, Folk Belief, Narrative Repetition, Ritual

There is no single Candyman. From Clive Barker’s short story “The Forbidden”<sup>1</sup> to the four movies that it inspired, audiences have witnessed a myriad of re-tellings of this character. Encompassed by the overarching framework of the movie or story itself, within each there also exists the multi-layered narratives told and retold through each plot as characters share, conjure, and encounter the sometimes man, sometimes monster, sometimes victim, and sometimes protector that is Candyman. This repetition plays a critical role not only in the construction of such an entity, but also the contexts from which he emerges. This particular narrative pattern, mirroring the summoning rituals found in the movies themselves, is rooted in local knowledge and belief and sets up a notable tension between community-based worldviews and those of the institutions that operate within a different framework of knowing.

Questions of belief, disbelief, and half-belief in Candyman are frequently expressed through the repetition of his name and/or his story. Regardless of how they are constructed, the potential of his narrative and his presence serve to challenge institutional knowledge and the power imbalances between different groups. This paper utilizes the lens of unofficial or folk narrative, particularly emerging from belief, and the resulting informal knowledge (that which exists outside of institutional verification) to explore the presence and power of the Candyman stories. Moreover, it examines the points of conflict that occur when different systems of knowledge interact within an already imbalanced power structure. The unofficial and lived experiences of those who share these stories stand in contrast to the institutions, primarily academic and legal, that dismiss the validity of these narratives and, consequently, the contexts from which they emerge and the people who turn to them. Furthermore, this paper focuses on the act of ritual repetition itself. In particular, it examines the ways in which Candyman seeks to tap into this power while also subverting it to further destabilize official narratives as he works to reclaim his own story, even as it is bound to each retelling.

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<sup>1</sup> Clive Barker. “The Forbidden.” In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988): 1-37.  
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## INTRODUCING CANDYMAN

Candyman first emerges in the pages of Barker's short story, which revolves around Helen Buchanan, a university student studying graffiti. Her research takes her into spaces othered through poverty and class difference as she encounters the legend of Candyman and, ultimately, the figure himself. In the first movie, 1992's *Candyman*,<sup>2</sup> Helen (here with the last name Lyle) and the Candyman are brought into an American context that expands upon the character as it explores questions not only of class but also of race. In this version, the titular character is Daniel Robitaille, a 19<sup>th</sup> century artist and son of an enslaved man who is tortured and killed for his relationship with Caroline Sullivan, a white woman. Set loose by repeating his name five times in a mirror, Candyman is often responsible for the brutal deaths of those who encounter him. Here it is again Helen, a university student in this version as well, who encounters his legend in the process of conducting her research. Seeing in her a reincarnation of his lost love, Candyman pursues, torments, and seduces her until she eventually becomes her own incarnation of the legend after she dies rescuing a baby from a fire.

The second and third movies focus on women who are Candyman and Caroline's descendants and the tension between his desire to reclaim this lost family and the cruelty with which he pursues this goal. *Candyman: Farewell to Flesh*<sup>3</sup> focuses on Annie Tarrant, an art teacher who, among others, calls upon Candyman in an attempt to disprove the legend to her students, while *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead*<sup>4</sup> picks up 25 years later, following Annie's daughter, Caroline McKeever, as she too encounters and must grapple with the figure of Candyman. In 2021, the fourth movie in the series, although it was constructed as a direct sequel to the first, was released under the name *Candyman*.<sup>5</sup> It centers around the now-grown baby saved by Helen in the first movie, Anthony McCoy, as he slowly transforms into Candyman.

## FOLK BELIEF

David J. Hufford writes that folk beliefs are the unofficial beliefs that “develop and operate outside powerful social structures.”<sup>6</sup> Through them, a primary tension regarding the existence and experience of Candyman arises out of how narratives are treated by official institutions and unofficial groups. These divisions are further enhanced by how the processes of the former establish hierarchies of truth and value that are then imposed upon the latter, replacing the narratives that the informal communities have established and that they need. Most notable in relation to Candyman is the difference between the official narrative, which carries a fixed form, and the unofficial ones that are malleable and adaptable, emerging out of the desperate situations within which they are shared.

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<sup>2</sup> *Candyman*, directed by Bernard Rose, released 1992, by Propaganda Films, accessed Jan. 7, 2022. Crave TV.

<sup>3</sup> *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh*, directed by Bill Condon, released 1995, by Propaganda Films, accessed Jan. 11, 2022. Prime Video.

<sup>4</sup> *Candyman: Day of the Dead*, directed by Turi Meyer, released 1999, Artisan Entertainment, accessed Jan. 15, 2022. Tubi.

<sup>5</sup> *Candyman*, directed by Nia DaCosta, released 2021, by Universal Pictures, accessed Jan. 21, 2022. iTunes.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Hufford. “Beings without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits.” In *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore & The Supernatural*. Edited by Barbara Walker. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995): 22. *Journal of Gods and Monsters*

The differentiation between official and unofficial narratives in the Candyman stories is not predicated on the former being historically accurate or rational, both of which are often articulated through the fixed nature of the information. It is, instead, simply the narrative that supports a power system. Terms such as rational and reasonable become affixed to them to mark this distinction and create a stronger sense of truth; a process which, in turn, creates an expert language that is often restricted in access. Hufford notes that the systems that allow for this establishment of official knowledge, including specialized equipment like microscopes and the training required to use and interpret them, separate it from the ordinary person.<sup>7</sup> The resulting expertise operates to cut off certain people and groups from connecting to or producing “true” knowledge and then positions them as inferior or ignorant because of it. Consequently, folk beliefs, especially around the supernatural (natural being defined by the institution), are not inherently part of anti-intellectualism but a process of rebalancing wherein “the intellectual work and insights of ordinary people must be acknowledged.”<sup>8</sup> Candyman becomes part of this equalizing approach, emerging from within these communities and denying the static nature of narrative and the resulting facts that should mean he cannot exist. He does; the official structures are the ones that refuse to see him because their limited framework has already determined he is fiction.

In “The Forbidden” and the *Candyman* movies, the process of narrative repetition is part of the means by which Candyman is discovered and the truth of his existence is revealed, affirming the rationality of belief in him. The story of Candyman is teased out, told, and re-told until a “true” version emerges rooted in the facts of the community and embodied within the appearance of the character himself. Nevertheless, he remains folk knowledge, rooted in the group and gaining power from his position as legend and rumor. The stability of the singular narrative is fractured because it is dependent on the individual’s lived (or killed) experience of him. Furthermore, the process begins again in the next movie, and his actions and their consequences are refolded back into the folk (or unofficial) narrative tradition. He is not static, but that does not undermine the truth of his presence; it reflects the changing realities and needs of the communities that speak of him.

Adam Ochonicky identifies at least five different versions of the Candyman who appears in the first film alone: “an urban legend, a gang leader, a historical figure, a supernatural entity and Helen’s posthumous state of existence.”<sup>9</sup> He also endures as a game – call his name five times when standing in front of a mirror and he will appear – and as the merging of the historical, supernatural, and legendary whose name, along with his hook, is wielded to instill fear. Each of these roles requires its own set of beliefs and worldviews, often revealing specific connections to or tensions between different communities and institutions.

Belief and need frame the narratives and their telling. Within these stories, it is rooted in the lived experiences of those who are regarded as marginalized, communicated through their placement in spaces of decay and crime that contrast sharply with those of institutional structures grounded in a different social status. In the first *Candyman* movie, this is clearly articulated by

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 24-25.

<sup>8</sup> David J. Hufford. “Beings without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits.” In *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore & The Supernatural*. Edited by Barbara Walker. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995): 24.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Ochonicky, “Something to be haunted by: Adaptive monsters and regional mythologies in ‘The Forbidden’ and *Candyman*.” *Horror Studies* 11, no. 1 (2020): 112.

the juxtaposition between the home of Helen and her research site which were both built using the same floor plan. The treatment of the stories and worldviews that emerge from these spaces of cultural dismissal further this tension. They become sites of belief that stand in stark contrast to and in defiance of the disbelief that is regarded by institutions as a neutral position. It is from here that various professionals seek to puzzle out what they see as the errors that have led to a belief in the supernatural and uncanny.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, they discard the possibility of them being true because it is in direct contrast to their systems of knowledge, which results in associations between the “uneducated” and the “superstitious”.

### OFFICIAL DOUBT AND UNOFFICIAL PROOF

The emergence of informal knowledge through lived experience is often central to the study of unofficial beliefs and is reaffirmed throughout the different films. Characters who begin from the framework of disbelief or potentially half-belief and summon Candyman come to experience his reality through their personal encounters with him. Their hypothesis that he does not exist is tested through the ritual of calling him, and it is found to be false. However, instead of challenging the institutional norms that dismiss him, these individuals and their trauma, and often gruesome deaths, are rewritten to fit the pre-existing narrative. Their experiences are labelled as irrational and false or the subject of “ordinary” violence, such as how the gangs in the first movie and a corrupt detective in the third one use the idea of Candyman to instill fear.

The official narrative is a powerful one. In the first *Candyman* movie, Helen encounters it when her story does not make sense to the external world, and she ends up institutionalized. These formal systems and the frameworks they produce do not always match onto people’s experiences because they require a different form of storytelling that has been labelled as truth but is often its own interpretation of the events. Elaine J. Lawless, who spent time conducting research in a women’s shelter, writes about how personal narrative has to be changed in order for it to fit within an institutional structure:

And gradually, as we cajole and urge and support her [a woman in the shelter] through “the system,” we facilitate the work of those who seek to create a coherent story, a story that will “fly” in court, that will gain her services, that will satisfy the prosecutor, that will be in the language others have devised – language that is far, far from the flesh-and-blood violence she still carries in and on her body, in her mouth, in her most private parts, on her head, in her ears.<sup>11</sup>

The positioning of the people, including potentially the audience, and their connections to institutions will influence the weight they give to Helen’s narrative in the first *Candyman* movie. Is it the erratic behavior of someone detaching from reality, turning her into an unreliable narrator, or is she experiencing something that goes beyond the structures of social institutions and norms? She embodies the tensions between these different systems of knowledge and the

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<sup>10</sup> David J. Hufford. “Traditions of Disbelief.” *Folklore* 8, no. 3 (1982): 47.

<sup>11</sup> Elaine J. Lawless. *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment through Narrative*. (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2001): 38.  
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processes of moving from disbelief to belief, as she holds up a mirror to all of us to reflect on our own interpretation of her rapidly changing truths.

### *The Academic World*

In “The Forbidden”, when Helen finally encounters Candyman, he tells her that because she doubted him, because she was not “content with the stories, with what they wrote on the walls. So I was obliged to come.”<sup>12</sup> Her doubt, in part, is driven by the pressures of the academic world she is attempting to join, even though she faces sexist dismissals from a range of individuals, including her husband Trevor. She is spurred on in her research because he doubts the validity of her project on graffiti, noting that it has been done before.<sup>13</sup> There is no room in academia for retelling a story; there is a demand for newness. At first, Helen tries to navigate this requirement. She wants to find a new story within the graffiti, even though it is a constant process of conflicting and overlapping narratives that come and go and that are often anonymous or coded. The one she seeks would make sense to her desired scholastic world, which only tolerates the intrusion of graffiti into its spaces for the purposes of academic exploitation. From the beginning, she recognizes the binding nature of academia with its “sociological jargon” such as “*cultural disenfranchisement [and] urban alienation.*”<sup>14</sup> She sees herself as doing something different. Instead of creating more labels, she strives to uncover “some unifying convention perhaps, that she could use as the lynch-pin of her thesis.”<sup>15</sup> She is unable to fully remove herself from this desire to frame, to simplify, and to crack the code of belief for the approval of her intellectual peers.

The lure of the academic interpretation continues at a dinner party. Here, the inability to consider the reality of Candyman and the lives of those who turn to him, nor to accept that their belief may extend beyond externally verifiable facts to something more rooted in their communities and histories, is apparent. When Helen tells the story of Candyman to the other members of academia, they initially give her the attention she desires. Barker writes of the dinner guests that they “looked gratifyingly appalled at the story.”<sup>16</sup> However, as the discussion continues, Helen finds herself in conflict with Purcell, an academic with a tendency to refer to her as “my sweet”, suggesting that her witnesses are lying, and then concluding, when challenged by the use of the word “lie”, that the stories are told for provocation, “merely titillation for bored housewives.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout this exchange, questions of power are being explored and hierarchies are re-articulated and re-affirmed by the placement of the stories of women and of ordinary people into the realm of the dismissible, of gossip and distraction. They are not of the same stature as those of the male academic who can see the truth of the story where Helen cannot.

This tension between the academic and non-academic is a theme brought forward in the movies as well. Laura Wyrick writes of the first *Candyman* film that it “opens with dual sequences of narrative”. The first is the folkloric version: a voiceover that tells the legend of

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<sup>12</sup> Clive Barker. “The Forbidden.” In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988), 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Clive Barker. “The Forbidden.” In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988), 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 18-19.

Candyman, while the second is what could be considered the “official history”, contextualized within the academic setting.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that within this film, the academic institution is not only rooted in male authority but also in whiteness. In order for Helen to find some placement within it, she utilizes one of the advantages that she has as someone belonging to “the white world of middle-class academia” that allows her to move into the spaces of the “African-American underclass” while regarding them as solely a research subject.<sup>19</sup> As she becomes more situated within the unofficial narratives, however, her position changes as her ties to the academic world weaken and she begins to become part of the audience for Candyman through lived experience.

The progression of narrative authority from academic institution to community is not just a process undertaken in the plot of the film but also in how the movies themselves tell and retell this story. In the latest incarnation directed by Nia DaCosta, the examination of academic authority begins by the re-situation of narrative voice. As DaCosta explained in an interview, “[t]he first film is very much from an outsider perspective, from a white point of view, and this movie is from the Black perspective and even more specifically from the perspective of Candyman.”<sup>20</sup> Institutional structures still exist, but they are changing. At an art exhibit, the audience witnesses Anthony, who, like the first Candyman, is an artist, in conversation with a critic. During this scene, their language slips between artistic and common, recognizing and exploiting the pretentious as they discuss his work, inspired by his research into Candyman. He begins by trying to articulate his experience of engaging with this pattern of repetition: “I’m trying to align these moments in time that exist in the same place. The idea is to almost calibrate tragedy into a focused lineage that culminates in the now.” Then he shifts to undermining his perspective and presence by noting that the art speaks for itself. The critic agrees but counters his message by describing the piece as speaking “in didactic knee-jerk clichés about the ambient violence of the gentrification cycle”. They retell to establish what the narrative should be. They hover on the boundaries of what exists in the world of lived experience while still repeating the linguistic patterns of institutions that discuss suffering with curiosity but enact no tangible change. This pattern, however, has the potential to be broken by Anthony as finds himself increasingly pulled into these narratives, both in his growing artistic obsession and his own bodily transformation.

The possibility of institutional and individual change both exist in DaCosta’s version. It is directly embodied in Anthony as he is transformed, like Helen in the first movie, into a version of Candyman. But it is also present in the official realms. Brianna Cartwright, Anthony’s girlfriend, attends a dinner where she is being wooed by different gallery owners to come work with them, one offering the promise that “[y]ou can change the institution from the inside”. By

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<sup>18</sup> Laura Wyrick. “Summoning Candyman: The Cultural Production of History.” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 54, no. 3 (1998): 89.

<sup>19</sup> Lucy Fife Donaldson. “‘The suffering black male body and the threatened white female body’: ambiguous bodies in *Candyman*.” *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 9 (2011): 33.

Mikel J. Koven further complicates these racial issues by considering questions of the “fear of white fetishization of African-American culture” and its relationship to the equally problematic issue of the idea of “going native” in relation to the first *Candyman* film (Mikel J. Koven “*Candyman* can: film and ostension.” *Contemporary Legend* 2 [1999]: 159.).

<sup>20</sup> Sonaiya Kelley. “Reviving ‘Candyman’: How Jordan Peele and Nia DaCosta made more than a sequel.” *LA Times*, August 26, 2021.

the end of the movie, however, it is apparent that this transformation cannot emerge from the official systems alone but will only take effect if also enacted within the communities that so desperately need it. It can only be accomplished by recognizing and employing their beliefs and worldviews. Otherwise, it remains another cycle of knee-jerk clichés.

### *The Legal World*

One of the key tensions emerging from the official and unofficial narratives of *Candyman*, especially in “The Forbidden” and the first and last films, has to do with interactions between systems of power and the people who are attempting to live their lives while grappling with this level of oppression. These cycles were highlighted by DaCosta as being particularly important for the latest movie and its reflection on “racial violence and specifically police violence against Black people.”<sup>21</sup>

In Barker’s story, the issues are not rooted in race but economics and class; however, all of the versions address, in some capacity, the legal institution and its power, particularly as manifested in the police and detectives. In “The Forbidden”, it is acknowledged that the police do not care. Anne-Marie, one of Helen’s research subjects, snorts in disparagement as she tells Helen that “[p]olice don’t give a damn what happens here. They keep off the estate as much as possible. When they do patrol all they do is pick up kids for getting drunk and that. They’re afraid, you see. That’s why they keep clear.”<sup>22</sup> The institution that is meant to protect people from danger is not willing to face their own fears when it comes to this community. Later, at the dinner party amongst academics, a possible conspiracy involving police suppression of the murders occurring in the poorer community is brought up. When Helen asks why they would cover it up, the response is that police procedures do not make sense.<sup>23</sup> Institutional narratives may be accepted as the “official” or “correct” ones, but fractures become apparent in this seemingly cohesive story when it is revealed that for those of this academic class, who belong to a different institution with its own language and logic, they do not always make sense. They are yet another version, another story, but they still hold power.

A significant change in the understanding of Candyman in this latest movie comes from the idea of the hive and how it expands the power of this figure, himself, and his ties to specific contexts. In this film, there is no single Candyman; he emerges out of each community and time period that retells his story.<sup>24</sup> As the character William Burke explains to Anthony, Daniel Robitaille, the Candyman of the first three movies, was the first one but not the last. William has his own one based on his experiences as a child when a local Black man who gave candy to the kids of the neighborhood was accused of hiding razor blades in them. Because of this, the police came and beat, tortured, and killed him. However, the razor blades continued to appear in the candy, exonerating him within community knowledge but not resulting in any justice for his death nor any change in the system that killed him. For William, the evil he encountered that day

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<sup>21</sup> Sonaiya Kelley. “Reviving ‘Candyman’: How Jordan Peele and Nia DaCosta made more than a sequel.” *LA Times*, August 26, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Clive Barker. “The Forbidden.” In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988), 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>24</sup> This repetition is expanded upon in the closing credits where the same style of shadow puppet show that opens the movie tells the story of the Candyman who have come before, beginning with Daniel Robitaille.

was in the police and their actions, not in a boogeyman called Candyman. This experience compels him to later initiate the story one more time through his role in transforming Anthony into Candyman, most notably by cutting off his hand and replacing it with the infamous hook.

While this newest version of *Candyman* serves as a direct sequel to the first movie, this repositioning of the hero and villain works well building off of the ending of the third film. It concludes with the defeat of Candyman through the demythologizing of him. Caroline, the protagonist of this movie, shifts the blame of his crimes onto the corrupt and racist Detective Kraft. Her motivation is to provide the official version that will destroy the legend and prevent the retelling and inadvertent summoning of Candyman. Without his story, there is no Candyman. However, it also serves to reflect the complexity of villainy within the community that extends beyond one supernature figure to include corrupted institutions and those who enforce them. The monster remains, but its identity is transformed through yet one more retelling into one that the institution can comprehend, even if they will do little to address their own role in his creation and power over the marginalized.

The beginning of the latest *Candyman* movie further reinforces this reframing of hero and villain by breaking a pattern of repetition. While all of the other movies open with a retelling of the making of the monster Candyman, this film begins with a shadow puppet show put on by a Black boy that tells the story of police arresting an innocent young Black man, highlighting from the very start who is the real monster of this story. It further demonstrates the tension between the police as an institution and that of the people who are forced to grapple with it. In this way, Candyman is recast from the beginning. He is not the monster but a victim, and, at times, also a possible protector.

This tension is again repeated at the end of the movie when Brianna is arrested after a cop shoots and kills Anthony, inadvertently hastening his transformation into Candyman. She is witness to the crime and is told by the police to change her narrative to fit with the official one that absolves them of any wrongdoing. In this way, stories are recognized as having great power to alter people's lives for better or worse and reconstruct what is accepted as truth altogether. Furthermore, the objective truth of the institution is shown to be a lie; it is just another story given authority because of who tells it. However, instead of accepting the police narrative, Brianna turns to another one, the one that comes from a different space that is outside of institutional norms and rooted in community knowledge, personal relationship, and urgent need. This story, therefore, holds greater power for her to wield. She summons Candyman as a protector to help her and, in doing so, this new version may even hold heroic potential.<sup>25</sup>

## RITUAL AND PARADOX

Candyman serves not only as an embodiment of the tensions between different systems of knowing but also, from this position of liminality, works to manipulate people's beliefs, stories, and experiences to gain further power of his own. These beliefs often manifest within

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<sup>25</sup> Candyman's role as villain, hero, and anti-hero is heavily contextual and dependent on numerous factors including each viewer's own opinion. Donaldson, for example, argues that there is a connection between the Candyman of the film and that of the romantic gothic hero. (Lucy Fife Donaldson. "The suffering black male body and the threatened white female body': ambiguous bodies in *Candyman*." *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 9 [2011]: 39) *Journal of Gods and Monsters*



and are expressed by the cyclical patterns found in ceremonies and rituals. Frequently, these performances are a means by which people take internal experiences, fears, and values and make them visible. When they do so in the movies by uttering Candyman's name, this action can reflect a variety of inner experiences ranging from disbelief when their summoning does not immediately result in the desired outcome to the curiosity of half belief to the deep need for belief that can grant an acknowledgement of or release from suffering and oppression. These rituals open up a space for individuals and groups to engage in a variety of different forms of narrative play.

The repetition provided through story and ritual provides opportunities to engage with both what is and what could be. Play itself invites such liminality, being "an example of multiple realities that human beings straddle; it is a close relative of ritual...and a site of human sociability and the imagination".<sup>26</sup> Figures of legend, ranging from Bloody Mary to Slender Man,<sup>27</sup> have long been a focus of folklorists exploring how individuals and groups engage with and use them for a variety of purposes. Legend tripping, for example, involves travel to the site of the story but also is "the enactment of ambiguity, the experiential affirmation of the weird or the unexplainable".<sup>28</sup> It is a means of experiencing what is frequently denied by institutional structures, both creating and affirming lived experiences. These narratives have also encouraged discussions around another form of legendary play, that of ostension or the acting out of the legend and the various forms that it can take,<sup>29</sup> including reverse ostension. As defined by Jeffrey A. Tolbert, reverse ostension is when "an iconic figure [is] produced through a collective effort and deliberately modeled after an existing and familiar folklore genre."<sup>30</sup> While he is using it in relation to Slender Man, it is equally applicable as one of the many ways in which characters and audiences alike can engage with a figure such as Candyman. All of these concepts point out different ways that individuals play with legends, whether bringing them forth or hunting them down, and how they become part of each person's experience and, therefore, their own developing story.

Specific objects within the legend and associated interactions also hold power. For the Candyman stories, the mirror and its role in calling forth this figure is of particular note. Mirrors themselves hold great power in folk traditions, and using them creates a variety of opportunities for both supernatural encounters and personal growth. In Elizabeth Tucker's examination of

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<sup>26</sup> Carole M. Cusack. "Play, Narrative and the Creation of Religion: Extending the Theoretical Base of 'Invented Religions'." *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14, no. 4 (2013): 362-363.

<sup>27</sup> Slender Man emerged online as a fictional, supernatural character who has inspired numerous retellings and has also been tied to real world violence. For a deeper discussion of this figure, especially how he connects to the larger legend tradition, see: Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill. "Fear Has No Face: *Creepypasta as Digital Legendry*." In *Slender Man is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*. Edited by Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill. (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2018): 3-23.

<sup>28</sup> Lynne S. McNeill and Elizabeth Tucker. "Introduction." In *Legend Tripping, A Contemporary Legend Casebook* (Logan, Utah State UP, 2018): 16.

<sup>29</sup> See: Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi. "Does the Word 'Dog' Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling." *Journal of Folklore Research* 20, no. 1 (1983): 5-34.

Lynne S. McNeill and Elizabeth Tucker. "Introduction." In *Legend Tripping, A Contemporary Legend Casebook* (Logan, Utah State UP, 2018): 11-12.

Mikel J. Koven "Candyman can: film and ostension." *Contemporary Legend 2* (1999): 155-173.

<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey A. Tolbert. "'The Sort of Story That Has You Covering Your Mirrors': The Case of Slender Man." In *Slender Man is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*. Edited by Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill. (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2018): 27.

mirror rituals connected to legends such as Bloody Mary and Candyman, she notes that the stories told by college students who encounter apparitions in the mirror “reflect a search for affirmation of a complex, sometimes contradictory self”<sup>31</sup>. For those involved with Candyman, and for Candyman himself, such contradictions of self are apparent, as are the connections they strive to make with others. When linked to love divination games, these mirror rituals tease the participants with glimpses of a future relationship and the promise of love that can speak to another aspect of the complex self. These were the desires that caused Daniel’s death in the first movie and continue to drive him in his role as Candyman.

In Bill Ellis’ book *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture*, he devotes several pages to detailing some of the examples of this folk practice, especially as reinterpreted into early 20<sup>th</sup> century Halloween postcards. At their most basic, these are games that involve seeking out information about a future spouse and may include the presence of a mirror along with other objects connected to the supernatural, like candles, while occurring at potentially haunted times such as Halloween and midnight. Ranging from playful to threatening, several show a young woman holding a candle to a mirror while the postcard caption provides instructions such as: “Let this design on you prevail / Try this trick (it cannot fail.) / Back down the stairs with candle dim / And in the mirror you’ll see HIM!”<sup>32</sup> The rhymes of such rituals parallel the repetition of others including summoning Bloody Mary and hint at some of the powers of Candyman himself to move his victims into a trance-like state that can undermine their, and the audience’s, sense of narrative stability. In doing so, the expected gaze is further subverted, revealing that this is his ritual, not theirs.

Ritual perversion is a part of the Candyman lore as mirror summonings are reinterpreted through his own stories and motivations. In the first film, he is the one who is seeking his lost love in a future time, seeing her reincarnated in Helen, even while she is the one who unwittingly summons him. Her intent and his desire are at odds: she is performing a ritual that she does not fully comprehend; he is encouraging it to gain back some of what he has lost. He is a corrupting force, a demon lover figure<sup>33</sup> who lures her away from her life. His power, not bound by the institution, becomes a warning about the influence of repetition and ritual on identity development and the dangers of going outside of the official script and its accompanying linear framework of disbelief: the future such actions promise to reveal may not be a desirable one. After all, Candyman can only promise Helen the role of victim, of exquisite suffering as the key

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Tucker. “Ghosts in Mirrors: Reflections of the Self.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 118, no. 468 (2005): 188.

<sup>32</sup> As Ellis notes, the framing of this practice leaves it open as to who will emerge in the mirror: future husband or evil spirit. (Bill Ellis. *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture*. [Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004]: 147.)

<sup>33</sup> While there are numerous variations of and titles for this folk narrative, certain core plot points frequently emerge to form an expected framework: a young couple exchanges vows, but before they marry the man goes to sea and is reported dead. The woman marries someone else, and they build a life and family together. After a period of time, often seven years, the sailor returns and convinces her to leave her husband and children and come away with him, as she initially vowed. He tempts her with the promise of ships bearing treasures and a future of luxury until she finally agrees, only to change her mind once she is aboard the ship. But it is too late. The sailor refuses to return her to the shore and is, instead, revealed to be a demon come to punish her. The ship is destroyed, and she drowns. For versions in the classical ballad tradition, see Francis James Child’s collection *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.

to her eternal future gained through intimate death.<sup>34</sup> However, as the movies progress, his attention turns from regaining his lost love, in the first film, to finding his lost family and creating a fractured or inverse version of it, in the second and third films, and in the fourth, as a new incarnation of Candyman saving his girlfriend.

Wyrick writes of the mirror gazing in the first film that “[t]he way gazes intersect through the mirror and Candyman’s ability to materialize behind Helen, so they both stare at their doubled reflection, imply that the subject cannot come into existence alone, but only as an object of an/Other desire.”<sup>35</sup> This results in the mirror becoming an example of “the deformative and fragmentary status of the narrative itself.”<sup>36</sup> His appearance in it suggests a successful ritual, but he exists in the wrong order. He is not of the future but the past. Candyman is constantly attempting to find and maintain his story and to write or rewrite sections to break certain cycles of suffering that dominate the stories that survive about him. However, it is inherently fragmentary, and his power comes from being “the writing on the wall, the whisper in the classroom,” and he, himself, admits that “without these things, I am nothing.”<sup>37</sup> The constant retelling paradoxically grants him power to elude permanent death because his story belongs to the community tradition, but this means it also belongs, in part, to the community. It ensures he remains alive amongst his people, but only through their words and fears, not through any tangible and stable internalized identity. He is a reflection of their suffering as much as his own.

There are times when Candyman seeks, through these rituals of repetition, to gain power by mimicking the language of institutional religion. In the first movie, he refers to the ideas of faithful believers. In “The Forbidden”, there are mentions of “Candyman’s tabernacle” and those who summon him “with sweetness” as being his congregation.<sup>38</sup> Ochonicky notes that these housing projects where the short story and first movie are set become “a horrific site of coerced participation in the cultish worship of a monster.”<sup>39</sup> Each of Candyman’s attempts at ascension run up against individual rejection and institutional barriers. In the second movie, Annie seeks out a priest to discuss what is happening. His conclusion is that Candyman is a false god, and only the singular god of his monotheistic religion, rooted in a now-stable sacred text, can save them. However, in the third movie, Candyman does find his congregation, who look to his stories as myths that inspire their own murderous desires framed in the language of sacrifice. Nonetheless, it too cannot last since, as discussed above, the conclusion of the third movie revolves around disproving the myth or legend of Candyman by placing all of the blame on Detective Kraft.

The idea of repetition teases opportunities for stability; however, Jerri Daboo identifies a paradox found within ritual performances undertaken again and again. On the one hand, the repetition of actions, words, movement, music, and all other components that make up ritual “establish a sense of fixity and permanence,” especially when it comes to a sense of “me” or self.

<sup>34</sup> *Candyman*, directed by Bernard Rose, released 1992, by Propaganda Films, accessed Jan. 7, 2022. Crave TV.

<sup>35</sup> Laura Wyrick. “Summoning Candyman: The Cultural Production of History.” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 54, no. 3 (1998): 96.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 98.

<sup>37</sup> *Candyman*, directed by Bernard Rose, released 1992, by Propaganda Films, accessed Jan. 7, 2022. Crave TV.

<sup>38</sup> Clive Barker. “The Forbidden.” In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988), 35, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Adam Ochonicky, “‘Something to be haunted by: Adaptive monsters and regional mythologies in ‘The Forbidden’ and *Candyman*.” *Horror Studies* 11, no. 1 (2020): 108.

However, it also becomes “a means to understand and embody impermanence, change and transformation of the bodymind.”<sup>40</sup> This tension emerges in part from the acknowledgement that perfect repetition is impossible. Within folklore, the interplay between that which stays the same among all versions or performances of an item of folklore and that which changes, whether due to need or desire, is of immense importance.<sup>41</sup> Among other things, it reveals what is of value in the moment and what is used to connect individuals and groups to others who have or will engage in their own version of the performance. It also serves as a reminder that there will always be points of variation, regardless of how small, because no two performances are perfect repetitions.

For Candyman, the mirror is always slightly flawed or skewed; he cannot be perfectly replicated. Through repetition, he seeks to reclaim his identity, especially as a counter to the erasure of himself and his story during his life. Jennifer Ryan-Bryant writes about the victims of lynching that “these aggressive social practices signal a total erasure of identity and personhood, an effective rejection of their right to exist.”<sup>42</sup> He reasserts his right to exist but cannot do so without a community to support or fear him. Consequently, his story is always in flux. And so he remains in a state of struggle, trying to survive and rebuild what he can with the power of liminal space, while never able to achieve greater influence because his world is diminished in the eyes of the institution. While he speaks of the power of rumor, he is also constrained by it. Even his community can move on to another story, as suggested in *Day of the Dead*, and he will fade back into the nothingness of a forgotten legend. While this may seem to be a victory, it is also a tragedy, depending on which version of Candyman you hear.

Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, who plays Anthony in the latest movie, stressed his desire to tell the story of Candyman in a more empathetic way, particularly in emphasizing his complexity as an unwilling martyr.<sup>43</sup> He is not just a historical figure, and he is not someone who chose to suffer and die for others. He is the victim of a horrific crime who cannot find absolution and whose suffering has been used, subverted, and gamified throughout its retellings. The perception of him as unwilling martyr consequently stands in stark contrast to Helen’s husband in “The Forbidden” who performs the role of self-martyr as a means of dominating his wife: “When, late on Saturday afternoon, Trevor found some petty reason for an argument, she [Helen] let the insults pass, watching him perform the familiar ritual of self-martyrdom without being touched by it in the least. Her indifference only enraged him further.”<sup>44</sup> Helen finds herself pulled between two forms of martyrdom that paradoxically ask her to sacrifice herself for their desires: one is to the institution, the other is to the story.

Daboo, in reflecting on ritual performance, recognizes that repetition fulfills a particular need: “a way to find relief and release from the difficulties of lived circumstances through a

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<sup>40</sup> Jerri Daboo. “To be Re-Bitten and to Re-Become: Examining repeated embodied acts in ritual performance.” *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 20, no. 5 (2015): 12.

<sup>41</sup> See Barre Toelken. *Dynamics Of Folklore*. Vol. Revised and expanded edition. (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996): 39-43.

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Ryan-Bryant. “The Cinematic Rhetorics of Lynching in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 53, no. 1 (2020): 92.

<sup>43</sup> Sonaiya Kelley. “Reviving ‘Candyman’: How Jordan Peele and Nia DaCosta made more than a sequel.” *LA Times*, August 26, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Clive Barker. “The Forbidden.” In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988, 20. *Journal of Gods and Monsters*

culturally acceptable form” while also highlighting that such actions do not address the underlying causes for these difficulties; therefore, they perpetuate the cycle themselves.<sup>45</sup> This additional ritual paradox is a critical part of the latest movie, as explained by its director who wanted to highlight the ways in which narratives and trauma are cyclical and passed on from generation to generation.<sup>46</sup> Candyman is stuck, never able to resolve his issues, reflected in his unhealed stump where his hand was cut off and the hook attached. He remains trapped in the narrative cycle; each repetition keeps him alive but also keeps him ensnared. Therefore, he understands the power of this repetition and how to use it himself. In their final confrontation in *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh*, he tells his descendant Annie that “you cannot resist what is in your blood, our blood; cannot fight what was meant to be.” Nevertheless, she successfully resists. However, the final movie, with the reawakening of the legend of Candyman and the positioning of him as protector, if not a potential community or folk hero, hints at the promise of something more. His final words to Brianna, which he speaks after having transformed into the visage of Daniel, are to “tell everyone”. In doing so, he encourages her to reclaim the power of their story, for her to repeat it again and again and, in doing so, to bear witness to its effectiveness against corrupt institutions. Perhaps it is in this story cycle that he finds his own redemption.

Repetition is powerful. It can offer comfort and stability in the knowledge of what is to come. It can also be an act of rebellion and subversion, a chant done in defiance of institutional authority and classifications of truth and fiction. The stories of Candyman reflect these struggles both as they are embodied in this character and in how others react in his presence. His story is one that ranges from the monster under the bed to the one who can defeat the monsters because he emerges out of the contexts within which his name is whispered, shouted, worshipped, or claimed. Yet he also carries within him his own identity formed out of social injustices that still remain, making him a potent but unpredictable figure for all who encounter him.

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<sup>45</sup> Jerri Daboo. “To be Re-Bitten and to Re-Become: Examining repeated embodied acts in ritual performance.” *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 20, no. 5 (2015): 17.

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