Article

"You Can Really Make the Story Your Own": Taking Back *Candyman*

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Abstract: This essay offers a comparative analysis of Bernard Rose's 1992 *Candyman* and its 2021 sequel directed by Nia DaCosta. Through an intertextual approach informed by gothic studies, narratology, and critical race theory, the essay shows how DaCosta's film establishes a transformative relationship with its predecessor. In the 2021 film, *Candyman* rewrites the story of the original, disrupts its stereotypical representation of Blackness, and appropriates the horror genre to give voice to the peculiar anxieties of contemporary African American life. In so doing, DaCosta's film also challenges classic gothic tropes of horrific Blackness while at the same time pushing back against dominant narratives on race to reclaim space for a discussion on racial relations in America filtered through a Black lens.

Keywords: *Candyman*; race; gothic

1. Introduction

Right from its earliest inception during the Golden Age of Hollywood, much American horror[1] cinema demonstrated a substantial and formal continuity with the classic gothic trope of "blackened evil that torments and is defeated by good whiteness" (Wester 2012, p. 2). Examples like *King Kong* (1933), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) are thinly veiled allegories of racial antagonism in which Blackness, disguised as a monstrous Other, threatens—but is ultimately conquered by—the dominant white order. The giant gorilla from Skull Island and the Gill-man dwelling in the dark lake in particular are especially transparent in their being signifiers for deep-seated, racist fears directed towards the African American community. These monsters' lustful chase of a beautiful white woman seems to reproduce the infamous attempted rape scene in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*—America's cinematic primer for racist archetypes. Although the original's blackface is substituted for props and puppets, such disguises ultimately serve the same scope: they drape Blackness in grotesqueness and horror to remark its radical Otherness and reinforce the symbolic order of white dominance.

Indeed, the textual strategies of classic gothic fiction—later absorbed and reproduced by classic horror cinema—have often worked to reinforce discourses on white superiority, turning the racial Other into an abject to the point that "in the context of twentieth-century Gothic, race becomes a master Signifier of monstrosity and when invoked, it blocks out all other possibilities of monstrous identity" (Halberstam 1995, p. 5). If we think of the gothic as a "psychological argument [concerned] with the ways in which otherwise repressed fears are represented in textual form" (Punter and Byron 2004, p. xviii), we must then conclude that the kind of fears that have been looming large in the (American) gothic imagination mostly belong to the white side of the color line. The representation of Blackness in narratives of terror continues to be marred by distortions and stereotypes well into the 21st century—think, for example, about the still ubiquitous "Black man dies first" trope. At the same time, though, Black authors have been appropriating the genre "to both speak back to the tradition's originators and to make it a capable and useful vehicle for expressing the terrors and complexities of black existence in America" (Wester 2012, pp. 1–2). As Wester

explains, this appropriation of established gothic tropes is not simply a matter of "inverting the color scheme." It involves a destabilization of imposed categories and boundaries that is able to expose, critique, and ultimately reject archetypal depictions of racial Others produced by white dominance (Wester 2012, p. 2). Destabilizing these ensnaring tropes, then, means revising the grammar of the genre, going beyond a superficial intervention on plot and characters to act on the symbolical (that is, cultural-historical) dimension and narrative structure of a story. Examples of this approach can be found in recent works like *Antebellum* (2020), Body *Cam* (2020), and *Master* (2022), in which racial dynamics are deconstructed, analyzed, and critiqued through a gothic lens that, thanks to the genre's ability to give voice to the repressed, is able to bring into focus otherwise submerged racial issues. Following Jordan Peele's groundbreaking *Get Out* (2017), these films address and redress some of the representational and ideological biases that have been part and parcel of American scary stories both on the page and on the screen. In so doing, they provide a much-needed commentary on the racialized history of the American gothic, at the same time giving stage to African American terrors that have been otherwise obscured by the historically predominant white angle adopted by the genre. But this revolution is not limited to the big screen. A TV series like *Lovecraft Country* (2020) not only adapts Matt Ruff's homonymous novel—a text that already demonstrates a revisionist relationship with the tradition of the American gothic, filtering its darkness through a peculiarly African American point of view—but expands its premises to perform a rather stringent attack on the white-supremacist foundations of H.P. Lovecraft's oeuvre. Even the much-criticized Amazon original series *Them* (2021), despite its heavy-handed execution, demonstrates a clever understanding of how established gothic tropes can be turned against themselves to reveal cultural-specific anxieties and give them diegetic prominence.

A recent case of this wave of Black re-appropriation of gothic and horror narratives seems to me especially compelling and worthy of further scrutiny: the direct sequel to Bernard Rose's 1992 *Candyman*, directed by Nia DaCosta and co-written by DaCosta and Jordan Peele—together with Peele's long-time collaborator Win Rosenfeld—released in 2021. The first film, a contemporary urban gothic tale set in Chicago, narrates the story of Helen Lyle, a graduate student at the University of Illinois who, while doing research for her thesis on urban legends, crosses paths with the vengeful ghost of Daniel Robitaille, a 19th-century Black painter lynched for a taboo interracial love affair. The plot was adapted by Rose from Clive Barker's short story "The Forbidden," contained in the writer's acclaimed series *Books of Blood* (1984–1985). Both narratives are concerned with urban myths and use horror as a way to get their social commentary across. In changing the setting from Liverpool to Chicago's Cabrini-Green projects, though, Rose complicates the focus of the original by adding racial issues to Barker's original reflection on class inequality in his native Liverpool. The director declared that his intention was to make a film devoid of die-hard racist horror stereotypes. "I tried to listen to the black actors and not fall into the Hollywood trap of imposing racial stereotypes and to make people rounded characters, not ciphers or caricatures," he declared (Hoad 2019, n.p.). But, although the director's intentions were in the right place, the film somewhat falls short of an empowering representation of Blackness in horror. The plot itself, in which Candyman-Robitaille bears more than an echo of the lustful Black monster pursuing the usual attractive white woman, offers ample ground for criticism. In spite of the fact that Robitaille is an innocent victim of institutional racism, he is turned into a ruthless, lecherous killer—a depiction that reveals its gruesome origin story to be more of a half-hearted plot device at the service of an established, racialized narrative than a proper attempt at shaping a consequential, historically meaningful backstory. Moreover, Rose's *Candyman* is chiefly told through the eyes of its white protagonist, a choice that relegates its Black characters to the background, spoiling them of actual agency and a fully formed identity. In so doing, the film reproduces the representational biases already demonstrated by some of the classic horror movies mentioned above, in which Blackness is but an exoticized backdrop to a white-dominated story. That being said, I do not want to give the impression that Rose's 1992 *Candyman*

is an entirely failed attempt at creating a horror movie charged with social commentary. Giving credit to Bernard Rose, it is worth mentioning how, with the exception of DaCosta's recent sequel, the other films of the *Candyman* series—1995 *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* and 1999 *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead*—are nowhere near the original in terms of their involvement with racial issues. Quite the contrary, in fact. By stripping the original story of its sociopolitical dimension and retaining only its basic monster-chases-girl dynamic, they stand as rather unremarkable slasher movies in which blood and guts abound, but a conspicuous reflection on race relations in America is nowhere to be found.

The same cannot be said when it comes to Nia DaCosta's direct sequel to Rose's film, a work that salvages 1992 *Candyman*'s social commentary and at the same time addresses directly and openly the original (conscious or unconscious) racial biases. This time, the film tells the story of Anthony McCoy, a thirtysomething African American painter from Chicago who becomes obsessed with the urban legend of Candyman and slowly but steadily loses his grip on reality as the truth about the ghost is gradually revealed. The movie's involvement with racial issues and its depiction of Blackness have been praised by a number of critics. In an enthusiastic comment on the film, writer and horror scholar Tananarive Due called DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman* "A reclamation of our story. A reclamation of our history. A reclamation of our trauma" (Langston League 2021, p. 7). As the writer points out, DaCosta's sequel is also something of a reboot, adopting a radically different point of view on the myth of Candyman and showing "what *Candyman* looks like through a black lens" (Langston League 2021, p. 8). The latest *Candyman* film is then to be understood as a work establishing a transformational relationship with its predecessor, rectifying its formal, thematic, and ideological approach in the creation of a narrative able to afford Blackness the central role that Rose's film ultimately denied it.

In the following pages, I will compare Rose's and DaCosta's *Candyman* films to show how the latter references and transforms the former's attitude towards race. DaCosta's work adopts an intertextual relationship informed by different cinematic and narrative strategies, aiming at liberating Blackness from the symbolic and formal ensnarements implied by the first *Candyman*—the same entrapments that have characterized the depiction of (Black) Otherness in the gothic tradition. DaCosta's film succeeds in giving shape and voice to the otherwise stereotyped, amorphous, faceless African American community that backdrops Helen's story in the original film, standing as a remarkable example of a Black author hijacking the racist biases that have defined much of American horror cinema (and gothic narratives writ large) to overcome such representational and narrative cul-de-sacs. The result is both a conscious intervention of multilayered re-elaboration and a wholly original work that succeeds in accommodating the complexities and anxieties of the contemporary African American experience, pushing back against ossified depictions of Blackness in horror, and showing a way out of the rhetorical traps inherent in the gothic genre. To illustrate how DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman* opens spaces for a proper, more dignified Black narrative dimension, I will first provide the pars destruens of my argument, analyzing Rose's 1992 *Candyman* to lay bare how it provides the audience with "images of horrendous Black others [. . .] in order to better establish and normalize whiteness" (Wester 2012, p. 5). Relying on Eric Lott's insightful reading of Rose's *Candyman*—an analysis that also provides the grounds for my interpretation of DaCosta's movie—I will frame the 1992 film as an example of an ultimately distorted representation of Blackness that mainly derives from white fantasy and fears and that reproduces unbalanced race relations by essentially siding with a ravenous whiteness preying on Black people. I will then move on to the pars construens of this essay. I will select some scenes from DaCosta's *Candyman* that I find especially suggestive of the film's ideological dimension and transformative approach towards the first movie's representation of Blackness and race relations. Focusing on the cinematic and narrative strategies adopted by DaCosta, and comparing them to Rose's, I will show how DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman* effectively subverts the formal and thematic depiction of race that characterizes its predecessor, reappropriating Blackness and restoring its rightful place in the story. Finally, I will illustrate how, by

defying stereotypical depictions of Blackness in narratives of terror and opening space for a more socially conscious handling of the genre, DaCosta's *Candyman* ultimately aims at fostering the discourse on race in America.

2. Setting the Story

As I briefly mentioned before, Bernard Rose's *Candyman* started off as a film that wanted to break free from stereotypical representations of Blackness in horror, but eventually fell short of its scope. In addition to some macroscopic elements, like the "Black monster after a white woman" trope, the film's racialized undertext makes itself manifest when we pay attention to the construction of certain scenes. Close-reading the two films to unearth their respective cinematic and narrative strategies is a rather effective way to understand the troubling assumptions hidden in the details of Rose's 1992 *Candyman*, and, conversely, the liberating grammar employed by Nia DaCosta's sequel.

In his study of racism and American cinema, Frank B. Wilderson III argues that the perpetuation of discourses of racial antagonisms "can be discerned in the cinematic strategies (lighting, camera angles, image composition, and acoustic design)," even when the plot strives for a representation apparently devoid of racist biases (Wilderson 2010, p. 5). In the context of the gothic, this assumption seems to echo Leslie Fiedler's well-known assertion according to which American narratives of terror identify "blackness" (that is, "evil", which in this case becomes a literal Blackness) with a threatening id that needs to be suppressed and are therefore "conservative at [their] deepest level of implication, whatever the intent of [their] authors" (Fiedler 1960, p. 148). Although Fiedler's statement is in no way to be read as a totalizing declaration on every horror story produced in the United States, it might indeed be true to the extent that white authors have (sometimes inadvertently, as in Rose's case) resorted to racialized representations of Blackness no matter their conscious intentions. The 1992 *Candyman* belongs to this group, as its purported underlying social commentary short circuits when measured upon its cinematic strategies.

One scene in particular hides an interesting commentary on the movie's representation of race and race relations in contemporary America. In the stubborn desire to gather material for her thesis, Helen is drawn towards the notorious Cabrini-Green projects by the legend of Candyman, a ghost supposedly haunting—and killing—the people residing there. Exploring one of Cabrini's dilapidated projects, she sets foot in an abandoned flat. Moving through dark rooms and taking pictures, she crawls into a hole in one of the walls to emerge in a graffiti-covered chamber—probably the hideout of a gang. Stepping into such a space, Helen slowly comes right out of the gaping mouth of a screaming Black person painted on the wall. Philip Glass' eerie soundtrack rises to a crescendo as we watch the young woman creep out of the scream, heightening the feeling of danger already implied in this tense sequence.

Taken at face value, the scene could simply be read as a way to visually enforce Helen's anxiety. As a rather helpless scholar in an obviously threatening environment, she is liable to fall prey to the many street thugs that populate Cabrini-Green—or worse, to come face to face with the murderous specter of Candyman himself. Hence, the open mouth is a clear representation of the urban and parapsychological violence that surrounds this derelict place and that could swallow Helen up whole at any time. Of course, the fear imbibing the sequence lies entirely on the other side of the color line: Helen is afraid of a Black space populated by Black people. Or better, a Black space turned into a gothic dungeon populated by Black people transfigured into urban savages. Bernard Rose declared that "the fear people had of walking around [Cabrini-Green] was the very essence of racism," suggesting once again a redeeming quality to his film. But, as noticed by Black filmmaker Carl Franklin, among others, his depiction of the neighborhood and its dwellers strongly reinforces racist white perceptions (Lovell 1992, n.p.). With street gangs, graffiti, and a general feeling of barbarous violence and decay, the Cabrini-Green represented in this movie looks more like a darkly exotic, savage society than the product of institutional neglect. Robin R. Means Coleman and Mark H. Harris are even more open in their criticism

when they write how the "Black characters in *Candyman* are [. . .] largely one-dimensional, urbanized versions of the African villagers who were fodder for movie monsters in the '40s and '50s. Cabrini-Green is the African Jungle, and Helen is the great White hunter pursuing the big game" (Coleman and Harris 2023, p. 108).

A scene such as this proves that, no matter its intentions, Rose's 1992 *Candyman* is reproducing the racial fantasies and racist stereotypes it allegedly tries to demystify. Moreover, if this kind of racist depiction steeped in white fears were not hair-raising enough, this sequence could be read as suggesting a deeper, even more disquieting hint at the film's unconscious ideological dimension. Perhaps counterintuitively, the protagonist's role in the scene could be interpreted as that of someone causing distress, not suffering from it. Clambering out of the mouth passage like some undesirable creature (indeed, like a horrific humanoid parasite), Helen might also be "unstop[ping] a black man's scream, or occasion[ing] it, or both," as Eric Lott (2017, p. 29) notices. Reading the scene against Rose's 1992 *Candyman*'s narrative arc as a whole only reinforces this interpretation. Helen's presence in the projects—and, generally speaking, her behavior—are motivated mainly by academic ambition rather than by a genuine desire to document and give relief to the destitute Black life that inhabits this neglected neighborhood. Even though the girl sacrifices herself in the end to save a Black newborn from being burned alive by Robitaille, her stubborn will to investigate the story directly or indirectly endangers other people around her—and these people, unsurprisingly, are mostly Black. An example can be found in the scene discussed above. Helen is so blindly bent on her exploration that she does not mind leaving her friend Bernadette behind and alone in what could possibly turn at any moment into a very dangerous situation—Bernadette's distress is made explicit as she is shown nervously smoking and looking around as she is waiting for the protagonist to come back. Always the faithful sidekick, Bernadette ends up getting herself killed in her desire to help with her friend's research—apparently, the Black girl too dies first. Through her work, then, Helen inevitably "capitalizes on black endangerment" (Lott 2017, p. 29), appropriating Black suffering for the sake of her career rather than exposing and denouncing it.

Although Helen's part is that of a heroine and a savior—or better, precisely because of this—Roses' 1992 *Candyman* ultimately fails to deliver an empathic, honest picture of the scourge of institutionalized racism, focusing more on the protagonist's tribulations than on the troubled history of Chicago's African American community. Rose's film is obviously concerned with issues of sanctioned poverty, ghettoization, racism, and racialized violence, but it approaches and channels these themes mainly through Helen's gaze. From a purely narratological point of view, she is the main focalizer of the story, while Cabrini-Green is chiefly relegated as a background to her vicissitudes—a setting that, under its apparent social realism, hides a racialized projection steeped in white fear. And not only that. As I suggested, Helen's relationship with this space also implies a dynamic that fundamentally overturns the film's basic plot: Candyman might be after Helen, but the researcher is in turn after the impoverished African American community of Chicago (synecdochally embodied by Cabrini-Green), bent on expropriating and appropriating their history and trauma for the intellectual consumption of their fellow (white) academics. It would then not be an exaggeration to reframe Helen's role as that of the villain, or better, a standby villain for the whole history of white violence directed against Chicago's poor Blacks. As Robin M. Coleman remarks, exposing the film's racial dynamics in a nutshell, "[Helen] can do what Candyman would not: terrorize those on the other side of the tracks" (Coleman 2011, pp. 190–91). Helen summarizes in herself the clear-cut separation that Rose's 1992 *Candyman* makes between white and Black Chicago, an unnegotiable division that not only mirrors the actual segregation of the city, but also reproduces the classic gothic distinction between benign light and evil darkness.

The suggestion that Rose's *Candyman* is fundamentally channeled by white hegemony actually comes right at the beginning of the film. As the opening credits roll, we are presented with a series of aerial shots of Chicago that slowly move from the Loop to the

west, following the Dwight D. Eisenhower Expressway. Like its 2021 sequel, the film is clearly interested in the analysis of urban space, to the point that Chicago is turned into a legitimate character in the story—a character made of both sheer materiality and spectral elements. Sure, this is a ghost story, but Candyman is hardly the only phantom conjured by the film. To understand which specter haunts this sequence, it is useful once again to pay attention to the mise-en-scène. As the camera wheels away from the city's financial center, the impressive bird's-eye view shots of Chicago's bustling roads are attended by another eerie piece by Philip Glass. Interestingly enough, the title of the tune used for this opening is "Cabrini Green," which, being set against a space that is not the housing project, functions as an aural—or again, spectral—hint at the invisible rationale that drove Chicago's city planning.

Carl H. Nightingale extensively illustrates how, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Windy City was home to "a small group of elite segregationists" that "reformulated the crusade for urban color line in the United States," singlehandedly inventing a blueprint for segregation "by cloaking it within multiple levels of institutional and ideological camouflage" (Nightingale 2012, p. 355). In light of this—and as suggested also by Lott (2017, p. 28)—hidden beneath this aerial shot is the story of how Chicago came to be "a laboratory for segregation" (Moser 2017, n.p.), and how these practices turned areas like Cabrini-Green into places where the actual horror did not come from supernatural entities, but from the far-too-real "corporeal world legacy of slavery: drugs, crime, violence, poverty, and the racist policies that allow these social ills to proliferate" (Coleman and Harris 2023, p. 108). While the ghost of Candyman could very well be interpreted as a symbol for, and a denouncement of, what Saidiya Hartman defines as the "afterlife of slavery"[2] (a disturbingly apt description for a supernatural entity), in this case the cinematic techniques employed in the opening scene reveal a different truth—one potentially able to neutralize whatever social commentary the film had in mind. By starting his movie with such an overhead view, Rose is introducing us to the narration from the point of view of an omniscient narrator—or, at this point, even a demiurge. It is the point of view of the urbanists and planners who carefully sought to favor segregation by means of contorted junctions and convoluted topographies; the people who forced African Americans into places like the South Side and Cabrini-Green to leave them out of the city's social map. The Chicago we are brought to is not a neutral landscape (if such a thing ever existed in the first place), but "an extension of the master's dominion" (Wilderson 2020, p. 227): the spatial projection of a resolutely anti-Black political calculus and a gothic maze from which escape is not possible.

Illustrating the subtleties of this opening scene is crucial to understand how Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* revises the original to reverse some of its explicit and implicit claims about the role of Blackness in horror and in narrative at large; that is, how DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman* works as a transformative text in relation to Rose's film and the unbalanced racial dynamics it implies. Comparing the footage used for the credits at the beginning of the two movies, a fundamental difference in perspective immediately reveals DaCosta's *Candyman*'s intentions. After a brief prologue, the opening credits start to roll. The soundtrack by Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe sounds like an anamorphic variation on Philip Glass's tune: the churchlike, almost celestial ominousness of the original is twisted into a faster, anxiogenic arpeggio whose cavernous drone is reminiscent of demons rather than angels. To confirm this intuition, the titles this time aren't set against a bird's-eye shot of Chicago's road system, but a threatening worm's-eye view of the city's skyscrapers that look like they could crush us at any moment. This time, our point of view on the story is channeled through those who are subjected to the cityscape's racialized logics, not those who planned them. Both the eye of the camera and Lowe's claustrophobic soundtrack lead the viewer into a kind of narrative underworld that is the rather material, everyday world of African American Chicagoans, or better, of poor African American Chicagoans. Showing us a gentrified Cabrini-Green in which the dilapidated high-rises of the 1990s have been torn down and the surroundings turned into fancy apartment buildings, DaCosta brings back into the

picture Clive Barker's original focus on social inequality, informing her movie with a more sophisticated way of thinking about the intersection of race and class. Rose's 1992 *Candyman* is rather neat in its social divisions: middle-class whites are on one side; poor Blacks belong to the other. In DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman* the line is blurred, as the Black protagonists are clearly on the side of the haves. Still, their status is fragile. Anthony's success—and that of his girlfriend, Brianna Cartwright, a gallery director—largely depends upon the approval of white patrons and white critics. The way in which the plot has their apparently perfect lives gradually spiral out of control to the point of no return demonstrates a keen awareness of the unbalanced power relations that still characterize race relationships in the US. No Black person is safe here, no matter their social status. In this respect too, DaCosta's *Candyman* chooses to repudiate white stereotypes and myths—in this case, those of a post-racial America—to show how actual Black lives are still imperiled by the workings of institutionalized racism left uncritiqued, when not actively reproduced, by Rose's film.

3. Through the Black Mirror

A first suggestion about how DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman* narrative techniques aim at a fundamental thematic, formal, and even ideological subversion of Rose's film is given even before actual narration begins, right as the production companies' vanity plates roll. Eric Lott's analysis of Rose's 1992 *Candyman* is again useful in unraveling the possible meanings of this sequence—undoubtedly a clever joke shared between the authors and those in the audience already familiar with the story of Robitaille, but ripe for interpretation, nevertheless. As Universal's globe is followed by Metro Goldwin Mayer's roaring lion, Bron's logo, and finally Monkeypaw's floating hand, one cannot help noticing another dissonant detail: all the logos are shown as if reflected in a mirror—or, perhaps more suggestively, as seen from the other side of a mirror. Lott affirms that 1992 *Candyman*'s "motivating device" is what he dubs the "black mirror," that is, "all the beautiful (or demonic) attractions of 'blackness,' generated out of a thousand media sources and ideological state apparatuses," and—more importantly for the sake of this discussion—"the apparently fundamental precondition for the reproduction of national white selfhood if not dominance" (Lott 2017, p. 6) that is made possible through the evocation of a domesticated, distorted vision of Blackness. As Lott explains, the black mirror does not reproduce Blackness. It rather opens a space for racial phantasmagoria thanks to its "theatricalization of race" (Lott 2017, p. 7)—a space in which whiteness is redeemed at the symbolic expense of the Black Other. The fact that in Rose's *Candyman* the specter of Robitaille is always conjured through Helen's presence (or better, her gaze) is but another suggestion that he—and the idea of Blackness he vehiculates—is more a product of the graduate student's fantasy than a self-standing presence. Apart from a recurring series of close-ups on Helen's eyes, a directorial strategy that gives the protagonist's gaze a prominent presence in the film, this suggestion is reinforced by one scene in particular. When Helen is suspected of having murdered Bernadette and committed to a psychiatric hospital, Candyman visits her while she is restrained to a bed, asking for "one exquisite kiss" (Rose 1992). When the encounter, which has been recorded by the hospital surveillance cameras, is later replayed during a psychological interview, there is no one in the room with Helen—she thrashes and screams at nothing. There is a certain degree of ambiguity about the actual status of Robitaille's ghost, and the film plays with it throughout. But, at least from a symbolical point of view, it is not unreasonable to consider how Candyman seems to exist only when Helen stares into the looking glass, both literally and figuratively. Her perspective is always mediated by the Black mirror, which, together with her self-representation, reproduces her hegemonic conception of Blackness.

If Rose's *Candyman* stands right in front of this fun-house mirror, its sequel is ideally (or rather, ideologically) positioned on the other side of the same glass, aligning with Candyman and restoring Blackness by adopting its point of view on the story. This is suggested right from the prologue, in which we are introduced to one of the many Candymen that populate Peele and DaCosta's rewriting of the story (more on this polyphonic rewriting of

Candyman later). The prelude shows us Cabrini-Green dweller Sherman Fields, an odd but harmless man with a hook for a hand who likes to gift children with sweets. His fate is only implied in the brief introduction to the main story, but Fields is later revealed to have been beaten and tortured to death by a police squad that wrongly suspected him of giving a white girl a razor blade in a Halloween candy. Before his lynching, Fields goes into hiding for a while, but then reveals his presence to a Black kid (who later narrates the encounter as a grown-up) to offer him his candies—a move that will prove fatal. The kid spots Fields' reflection in a glass as the man appears from a hole in the wall and screams in fear. The construction of this scene, in which Fields shifts from being scary (and possibly a killer) into being scared and is later brutalized by the cops (becoming a victim), helps understand the point of view from which the story proceeds and the kind of terrors that fuel the movie. When Fields is about to be discovered by the police, his good-natured, if creepy, smiling face becomes a mask of pure terror. "That's when I saw the true face of fear," the narrator says at this point (DaCosta 2021). This time, Candyman is not to be understood as the projection of white fears, but rather the incarnation of the peculiar terrors of Black life in America, as Wester writes. Looking into the glass, the Black kid does not face a white phobia in a Black mask, but rather a concrete representation of Black fears in a white-dominated world. A scene such as this demonstrates DaCosta's desire to escape racialized depictions and racist stereotypes to present a more conscious and nuanced construction of Blackness, one able to restore Black existence to all its rightful complexity.

To better explain this dynamic of restoration, it could be helpful to recall Michel Foucault's interesting take on the spatial-ontological status of mirrors. "From the standpoint of the mirror," writes the philosopher, "I discover my absence from the place where I am" (Foucault 1986, p. 24). Ideally standing on the other side of Rose's 1992 *Candyman*'s mirrors, Blackness realizes its fundamental absence from the film's dynamics. It is imprisoned behind the glass, only able to leave this symbolic space when conjured as a white-devised specter of itself. Then, as Foucault writes, "from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am" (Foucault 1986, p. 24). Discovering one's absence from the picture can thus lead to a process of self-reassemblage through which a deformed, or altogether canceled, identity can exert its presence in a space—in this case, a narrative space—from which it was previously barred. This is the fundamental dialectic that lies at the core of DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman*. From its vantage point behind the (Black) mirror, DaCosta's film escapes the symbolic realm of white fantasy that defines Rose's work. By reversing Helen's point-of-view, it lays the foundations for a narrative able to restore Blackness' rightful place in the picture in an attempt to redeem its presence. Rather than choosing to lead the viewer into the ghostly world of Chicago's racial relations from the dominant point of view of a white scholar fixated on the object of her research, this time the film deploys an investigator who soon realizes he is the subject of the mystery he seeks to unravel: the upcoming African American artist Anthony McCoy.

On a superficial level, then, DaCosta's *Candyman* re-centers Blackness by substituting a white protagonist for an African American one. This time the main character is a Black painter who, as we find out towards the end of the movie, already appeared in the first *Candyman* as the infant that the ghost of Robitaille wanted to immolate in a pyre and who is saved by Helen's sacrifice at the end of the story. The move from researcher to artist as the narrative's main focalizer—the white investigator who passively consumes Black culture versus the black artist who actively creates representations of Black identity—is indeed crucial, and not only in terms of racial identity. Replacing the supposedly neutral, but ultimately biased, gaze of the ethnographer with the creative approach of the painter, the latest *Candyman* is once again acting as a transformative text in relation to the first film, commenting on its narrative techniques and disrupting them so as to accommodate Blackness in all its rightful complexity. To understand the implications of this compelling

shift, we need to look into the way in which mirrors are characterized in the two *Candyman* movies.

As I showed, in the first film, mirrors enact what Lott defines as a "theatricalization of race." From a narratological standpoint, this process implies a radical diegetic dispossession as Black people are turned into secondary characters for, or even puppets in, a white story. But in both *Candyman* movies, they also function as portals to another dimension, another space that, using narrative theory, we could define as another storyworld—a notion that goes beyond diegesis strictly defined, considering how narrative environments can be more productively understood as mental and emotional projections that establish complex cognitive and imaginative relations with the extradiegetic (the "real") world.[3] To illustrate this ability, it is necessary to go back to the scene mentioned at the beginning of this essay for a moment. Early into Rose's 1992 *Candyman*, Helen's condominium is revealed to have been originally intended as a part of Cabrini-Green and only later turned into an apartment complex because of its closeness to the Loop—a suggestion that, while white and Black people theoretically inhabit the same narrative space, they de facto live in radically different worlds. With a rather bizarre but interesting plot device, the bathroom cabinets of both Helen's complex and Cabrini-Green's projects are revealed to cover a passage that leads right into the neighboring apartment. As discussed before, this knowledge allows Helen to claim possession of space by unceremoniously invading it like a colonizer (as Coleman and Harris put it), appropriate Black trauma for her intellectual gain, and re-center the main narrative around herself. From a symbolic point of view, by going through the looking glass, she can seamlessly move from her upper-class flat into what looks like an upside-down realm: a dark inversion of her elegant, expensive apartment that is but the storyworld of Black life as seen through her (and the film's) eyes. What stands on the other side of the mirror is an irredeemable plane of darkness whose only chance at salvation is afforded by the white heroine's intervention and ultimately her sacrifice as the movie's white savior. Once again, the narrative dimension of Blackness in this film is not a fully developed space-time setting, but a distorted projection of white imagination—a somewhat inert narrative background that is only activated through white agency.

The relationship between Black and white storyworlds, mediated by mirrors, returns in the second movie, but with some crucial differences. Fascinated by the legend of Candyman and still unaware that he played a role in it, Anthony produces an art piece made of a mirrored cabinet that, when opened, reveals a dark room decorated with crude paintings of brutalized Black bodies. So, exactly like in the first film, when the mirror is traversed, it leads to a dimension of horror and violence. This time, though, the rationale underlying this creation escapes the logic of white fear, and again, not simply because its author is a Black man instead of a white person. When Anthony explains the motivation behind his work to a snotty art critic, he says, "I'm trying to align these moments in time that existed in the same place. The idea is to almost calibrate tragedy into a focused lineage that culminates in the now" (DaCosta 2021). If understood as a meta-commentary on Candyman's myth, this somewhat pretentious description reveals a rather revolutionary aim. Anthony decides to give the story of Candyman a deeper, multi-layered perspective that opens it up to include different but overlapping storyworlds. This desire to fragment a given narrative into a plurality of perspectives able to provide different points of view hides the intention of destabilizing the role the story has carved for itself within American film culture. If the cinematic myth of Candyman before DaCosta's intervention is a narrative that mirrors and reproduces the dominant image—filtered through the language of the gothic—of Blackness as a monstrous abject, in questioning its fixity, Anthony is re-negotiating its meaning in the present. The artist's piece is a way to critique the established myth of Candyman and its racialized accoutrements and turn it into an instrument of exploration capable of disclosing new meanings. In his work on the role of myths in contemporary cultures, Laurence Coupe discriminates between the foundational narratives of mythos and logos. He defines myth as a creative act that is always subject to change—the same story is told and retold through time in different ways and from different points of view

in an attempt to explore and understand reality. Logos, on the other hand, proceeds from myth—"*mythos* precedes and informs *logos*," he writes (Coupe 2009, p. 113)—but rejects its constitutional fluidity to stand as a crystallized doctrine, a fixed scheme to which the understanding of the world must be adapted. Examples of *logoi* include, of course, the divine Word, but also the glorification of reason and progress introduced by the Enlightenment—a discourse that plays an important part in the reading of Anthony's art that I provide below. Using Coupe's analysis, we could say that Anthony questions the logos of Candyman (its meaning as informed by the dominant white paradigm of race) and turns it back into a mythos: a narrative always in the making whose ultimate aim is to unsettle, disturb, and deconstruct the present to open a space for "possibility" (Coupe 2009, pp. 78, 81),[4] for other perspectives and interpretations to emerge. Through his art, Anthony is deconstructing and rearranging Candyman's myth by means of polyvocality and multi-temporality, and in doing so, he challenges the traditional construction of the racialized gothic Other—an act that, on a metanarrative level, is also able to bring into question the Western racial discourse writ large. Critic Heather Russell illustrates how, by resorting to non-linear, non-singular narratives, Black authors are effectively pushing back against Western grand narratives of progress and civilization. That is because, by chronicling a "seemingly ordained movement from proverbial darkness to transcendent light," such narratives also attended "discourses of slavery, white supremacy and colonialism" (Russell 2009, p. 2), and in so doing, they also provided grounds for much of modern scientific (and pseudo-scientific) discourse—including Helen's ethnographic knowledge. At the core of Anthony's art, whose investigation proceeds along the lines of creativity and empathy, is a rebuttal of hegemonizing scientific approaches that objectified and otherized Black people by turning them into specimens worth studying but not of sympathy, as Helen's fundamentally detached—when not openly harmful—behavior demonstrates.

But the importance of this reaction against monologism and linearity also lies in the fact that the imposed dichotomies implied by such grand narratives also informed the gothic tradition, and in particular its underlying conflict between wretched Blackness and virtuous whiteness—a conflict steeped in but also influencing 19th-century discourses on racial difference. As posited by H.L. Malchow, "Gothic fiction and racial discourse were indeed closely intertwined," to the point that "they mutually influenced each other" (Malchow 1996, p. 5). Envisioning Candyman through the multi-layered space-time complex suggested by Anthony's philosophy of composition, then, breaks this crystallized, vicious circle of mutual influence between gothic fiction and racist discourses. Defying the singularity of Candyman opens the film to a multidimensional representation of Blackness; an approach that, as Michelle M. Wright posits, "is predicated on the assumption that Blackness possesses agency and involves choices" (Wright 2015, p. 114). Anthony's artistic vision—and consequently, DaCosta's film—refigure Candyman's myth as a cluster of stories that connect African Americans across time, giving them the power to disjoint ossified narrative tropes, act as proper protagonists, and tell their own tale no matter how dark it might be. The movie jettisons the linear, monological story of a single person filtered through the usual white lens to embrace "temporal and spatial models that challenge normative narratological structures" (Russell 2009, p. 13). In so doing, DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman* unflattens the traditional, antagonistic, and narrow representations of race that characterize much of traditional gothic texts (as illustrated by Malchow, Halberstam, and Wester, among others), moving towards a conscious reflection on, and elaboration of storytelling that produces a narrative able to disrupt the prescribed boundaries of dominant discourses on race as reflected and dictated by the gothic tradition. This Candyman is not a nebulous accruement of white fears and guilts, the spectral Black man's shadow that Leslie Fiedler considered to be American gothic's "proper subject" (Fiedler 1960, p. 378), but a historically defined, collective character regaining voice and agency to strike back against the genre's conventions—and against racist discourses tout court.

More importantly, the impact of such a formal and narrative shift strives to escape the limits of diegesis strictly defined to stand as a political act writ large. In fact, as Russell again

argues, at the core of these textual strategies is a will to counter "Historical hegemonizing discourses," and engage instead in "self-conscious acts of historical revisionism that are requisite for sociopolitical transformation" (Russell 2009, p. 14). DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman* is a work that establishes a different way of thinking about race representation and race relations within the horror genre, but that at the same time aspires to spark some change even beyond the realm of cinema. And it demonstrates so, especially with its closing shadow puppets' sequence, whose analysis I offer below as a conclusion to this essay.

4. Conclusions: Out of the Shadow

As I illustrated above, Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* is not simply a sequel, but a text that, drawing from the materials put forward by Rose's film, re-authors the story of Robitaille, fissuring its otherwise linear, monological narrative and forcing on it the actual magnitude of the history of Blackness—and anti-Black violence—in America. In so doing, the film does not simply become a carrier for a representation of Blackness devoid of white stereotypes; it creates a space in which Blackness gains agency and is able to tell its own story. This is especially evident in the shadow play that embellishes the film's ending credits. Here, the parable of Candyman is rewritten again, demonstrating how strongly the film relies on the anti-hegemonic practice of telling and retelling the same story in different ways and from different points of view—a volition underlined by the director herself (Fandango 2021). The final sequence takes Anthony's multidimensional approach and expands it to the limits of DaCosta's *Candyman*'s storyworld and beyond. In fact, the eerie silhouettes that close the film not only tell the story of Robitaille once again, but intersect this narration with Anthony's own narrative arc, Field's lynching, and other stories of anti-Black violence (and Black resistance) seemingly unrelated to the main plot. If we pay attention to some revealing details, we understand how these vignettes represent actual examples of racist violence taken from American history's unending record of white on Black brutality.[5] There is Anthony Crawford, lynched in Abbeville, South Carolina, in 1916 after a banal disagreement with a white store owner. James Bird, Jr., who died in 1988 while being dragged by a pickup driven by three white supremacists in Jasper, Texas. And there is George Stinney, unfairly accused of murder and executed on the electric chair when he was only fourteen—the youngest American to be sentenced to death in the 20th century. After being slain, all these puppets rise from their deaths and join Robitaille and Anthony in their quest to avenge their lynchings, striking down their executioners with Candyman's signature hook-for-a-hand.

By showing retribution for acts of violence—be they real or imagined—the film reverses the classic horror denouement in which Blackness-as-darkness is finally defeated by the forces of good. Robitaille is not the monster to be ousted for things to get back to normal anymore, but a collection of stories able to rewrite their culmination—if not as a proper happy ending, at least as a finale contemplating some kind of rectification. On a superficial level, the moral dimension of this turn could be criticized. Isn't this just the prosecution of a chain of mindless violence supporting an eye-for-an-eye ethic after all? In Rose's film, Robitaille openly declares to be but a vessel for slaughter right from his first lines, when he declares, "They will say that I have shed innocent blood. What's blood for if not for shedding?" (Rose 1992)—a statement that only reinforces his substantial monstrosity, adding to the film's otherizing, fearful rhetoric of Blackness. No matter Robitaille's pain, the movie makes it difficult to sympathize with him by divesting the character of any humanity and framing his mission as one dictated by bloodlust only. When Anthony quotes these words at the end of the sequel, he adds a small but significant change to them. "They will say I shed innocent blood," he declares, and then, "you are far from innocent, but they will say you were" (DaCosta 2021). Being directed at a corrupt police officer, the addition to the original lines sounds like an open indictment of the institutional forces that defend the racist status quo and, by proxy, of these forces themselves. As David Punter writes, much of the value of analyzing gothic texts derives from their being carriers for a "negative psychology" that provides us "access to the denied hopes and aspirations of

a culture" (Punter 1996, p. 188). From this point of view, the silhouettes' killing spree is better understood as a symbolic fulfillment of the desire to strike back against the everyday violence of racism rather than an empty glorification of bloodshed. After turning Candyman into a mosaic of Black experience in America and redeeming him from his previous state of monstrous Otherness waiting to be sanctioned by the all-encompassing powers of white dominance, the movie at least hints toward a future in which racism and subjugation will not go unpunished if people come together as a whole.

There is one last element that needs to be discussed to better frame how, by joining together fictional and actual stories of Black people who fell at the hands of white racism, DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman* closes with quite a strong statement. Again, as with the formal-ideological revolution brought about by Anthony's art, an understanding of the subtle implications of this final sequence is necessary to look at the history of the gothic genre and its relationship with historical discourses on race. Teresa Goddu writes how 19th-century abolitionists often resorted to gothicized descriptions of slavery in order to better communicate the otherwise unfathomable horror of this condition. "Rather than an exaggeration, the gothic's sensationalism was the means through which to express the empirical truth of slavery's horrors," she writes, adding how the gothic "provided a ready vocabulary to make the unspeakable realities of slavery speakable" (Goddu 2016, p. 36). I believe that the hybridity of the shadow puppets' sequence follows the examples of these abolitionist pamphlets in the way they blur the line between the real and the fantastic to demonstrate their substantial similarity, using horror as an instrument able to ignite sociopolitical change. As one character puts it, "Candyman is a way to deal with the fact that these things happened to us [Black people], are still happening" (DaCosta 2021). Revealing how the ghost story the audience has just watched was always intended as a social commentary draped in horror—and hinting at the possibility of actually changing the status quo provided that this effort is a collective one—DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman* brings its revisionist approach outside of the film itself, aiming at producing an impact in the phenomenal world. As a confirmation, the last panel that appears after the shadow puppets' sequence and the end titles are over encourages the audience to visit a website dedicated to racial justice and healing, sponsored by the film's producers themselves. Being faithful to Robitaille's advice at the end of the movie, DaCosta's film sets off to "tell everyone" (DaCosta 2021) about the current racial situation in America, ideally standing as a spark able to kindle a renewed awareness of the social dimension of gothic narratives—and, hopefully, a stronger consciousness of the ghosts of racism still haunting the United States.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1. I use the words "gothic," "terror," and "horror" somewhat interchangeably throughout the essay. Whilst I am aware that there is a copious amount of literature devoted to illustrating the differences between "terror" and "horror"—dating back as far as Ann Radcliffe's "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826)—and their different functions in gothic narratives, I am not interested in discussions of genre or effect on the reader/viewer here. Rather, my focus is on the intertextual relationship between the two *Candyman* films, and especially on the comparison between their narrative and cinematic techniques and how they resonate with discourses on Blackness.

2. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Hartman considers how "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery," she writes, "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (Hartman 2007, p. 6). A description that is seamlessly translated into Cabrini-Green as imagined by Rose's *Candyman*.

3. I derive—and narrow down for the sake of this discussion—the term "storyworld" mainly from David Herman's *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Stressing the world-creating powers of narrative, Herman defines storyworlds as "mentally and emotionally projected environments in which interpreters are called upon to live out complex blends of cognitive and

imaginative response, encompassing sympathy, the drawing of causal inferences, identification, evaluation, suspense, and so on" (Herman 2002, pp. 16–17).

⁴   The section of Coupe's work I refer to here is dedicated to a specific myth, the myth of deliverance. Coupe's considerations can, of course, be understood more generally as describing the work of myth tout court, but I believe that this is a particularly apt myth to describe the inner workings of Nia DaCosta's *Candyman*.

⁵   Nia DaCosta openly states that the shadow puppets are also inspired by actual stories of racist violence (Fandango 2021). A more detailed analysis of how the closing scene blends together Candyman lore and the history of lynching in America can be found in (Dessem 2020).

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