



## Monstrous Embodiment in *Candyman* and *La Llorona*

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This video essay uses videographic film analysis to examine how gendered and racialized monster bodies in *Candyman* (2021) and *La Llorona* (2019) serve the dual function of archiving state-sanctioned violence and acting as a tool of liberation.

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### Creator's Statement

This video essay places Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021) and Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona* (2019) in dialogue with each other. Thematically, the two horror films speak to different issues: *Candyman* addresses the social injustice of gentrification and police brutality, while *La Llorona* confronts Guatemala's bloodied history and the genocide of the Maya-Ixil people. Even the depictions of monstrosity in the movies are different. *Candyman*'s grotesque and mutilated body contrasts sharply with *La Llorona*'s, whose body features no discernible signs of physical violence. However, when in conversation, *Candyman* and *La Llorona* offer a new perspective on how monstrous embodiment can serve as a social justice tool, one that combats violent systems and corrects past and current racial injustices.

My work in this video essay is born out of the idea that discomfort affects audiences. Graphic displays of bodily dismemberment, pain, and psychological suffering are meant to be uncomfortable, which is often a central theme in body horror movies. I seek to reveal body horror's ability to expose the "terror of racialized violence" (Means Coleman 2023: 339). This approach leads to analyzing how Alma (María Mercedes Coroy) and Anthony McCoy (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) are products of racialized violence. Anthony's rotting flesh, for example, embodies the violence that systemic racism and police brutality enact on Black Americans. Alma's body, although lacking physical mutilation, embodies the historical atrocities and years of pain committed by the Guatemalan state against the Maya-Ixil people. When examined together, Anthony and Alma reveal how monstrous embodiment serves the critical purpose of archiving the legacies of racial injustice. If, as Robin R. Means Coleman asserts, "[h]orror's currency is fear and discomfort" (2023: 338), then eliciting discomfort is important in understanding how body horror confronts uncomfortable histories of racial injustice.

I developed this project through a collaborative, pre-conference peer-review process with members of the SCMS 2024 panel "Cinematic Bodies/Videographic

Forms”: Desirée de Jesús, Pavitra Sundar, and Steven Sehman. I became aware through our conversations that certain editing techniques—many inspired by my collaborators’ work—allowed me to analyze the visual and sonic dimensions of the monstrous body. For instance, I employ split-screens to demonstrate Anthony’s shift from revulsion to fixation on his monstrous body. I also repeat imagery to draw attention to the festering wounds on Anthony’s decaying flesh, inviting viewers to consider the “corrosive racial trauma” (Means Coleman 2023: 332) he inherits from previous iterations of *Candyman*. Similarly, I utilize repetition in *La Llorona*, focusing specifically on the kidnapping and killing of Maya-Ixil women and children. These repeated images of genocide communicate the need to grapple with decades of state-sanctioned violence. Additionally, I manipulate the audio environment, enhancing key sections from both films to foreground the sonic dimensions of monstrous embodiment. Consequently, the aesthetic I created reflects what Desirée de Jesús (2025) describes as a “call-and-response practice” and, perhaps more importantly, speaks directly to Pavitra Sundar’s (2025) contention about reimagining scholarly production as a collaborative rather than individualistic process.

While this collaborative process shaped my initial approach, I also drew inspiration from John Gibbs’s “Creative Geography, Creative Connections: *Candyman*” (2023). I had already made a version of my video essay and presented it at SCMS before I saw Gibbs’s work. I sought to employ a similar videographic method after watching Gibbs’s video essay. Gibbs explains that he opted against using words or a voiceover because he thought it was important to let the original version of *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992) and DaCosta’s sequel “speak for themselves, and to each other, rather than imposing a commentary over them” (2023: 19). Similarly, I aspired to use “the richness of material” at the end of the video essay, juxtaposing both films with no edits (Gibbs 2023: 19). I also relied exclusively upon audio from *Candyman* and *La Llorona*. Christian Keathley contends that most compelling video essays are the ones that “borrow the aesthetic force of the moving images and sounds that constitute their object, and they borrow it for their own critical work” (2020). Gibbs undoubtedly achieves Keathley’s contention. I hope I succeeded in “borrow[ing] the aesthetic force of the moving images and sounds” from *Candyman* and *La Llorona*.

## References

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## Biography

Javier Ramirez teaches full-time in the English and Humanities Division. He is also a *rasquache* experimental filmmaker who combines do-it-yourself modes of film production with *rasquache* aesthetics to make 16 mm and Super 8 mm cameraless movies that disrupt perceptions of the U.S.-Mexico border.

## Review by Dana Och, University of Pittsburgh

Monstrosity and horror have oft been associated with political awakening, vengeance, and a movement toward revolt. A key question, though, is whether the monster is seen by the main character with empathy and compassion or with disgust and fear. This video essay highlights how infrequently its monsters are imaged through other characters' eyes. Thus, it becomes clear in the direct presentation of the monstrous bodies to the viewer without any mediation that the reactions of the embedded characters are retreating in importance while direct address to the spectator ascends, a shift that speaks to the ways that the endings of horror films of this ilk have no interest in closing off the narrative not for sequels but instead for a call to action. Ramirez's argument embodies these moments of directness, such as when his editing manipulations make small or large moments of historical and generational trauma repeat across the films, using the split screen and layered sound to allow the films to speak to and unlock one another across the time and space of racialized violence. As viewers of the video essay, we have to give full attention to the images—and they are often multiple images that pull our attention in various directions simultaneously to ascertain what we just saw: these moments embody the work that Ramirez suggests in the argument for how we are moving in this type of horror toward an ethics of attention, thought, and revolt as we work to witness the submerged histories of violent oppression.

## Review by Orquidea Morales, University of Arizona

Javier Ramirez's video essay "Monstrous Embodiment in *Candyman* and *La Llorona*" and accompanying statement deal with the complexity of embodied horror and liberation. Through a comparison of two films, *Candyman* (Nia DaCosta, 2021) and *La Llorona* (Jayro Bustamante, 2019), Ramirez highlights the pain of violence and the possibilities of the monstrous body when it comes to liberation and revenge. Both filmmakers use horror consciously as a tool to express real trauma. To convey this, Ramirez utilizes two interesting techniques: his sound design and layering of histories. First, Ramirez's work uses sound and silence to reflect the embodied pain of our two protagonists, Anthony (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) and Alma (María Mercedes Coroy). By repeating certain sounds, such as the buzzing bees and running water, Ramirez synthesizes the experiences of watching both films into a brief moment, allowing the audiences to sit with the pain of this repetition and constant haunting. I would argue that this video essay cleverly mimics the way horror films structure sound design to terrify and show us the monstrous. However, the video essay reminds us that unlike many horror movies, the monstrous in *La Llorona* and *Candyman* are not created in a vacuum. Rather, they are receptacles of centuries of colonization, conquest, and pain. Through the layering of silence and sound from both films, Ramirez reminds us that these films are screaming out what marginalized bodies have been taught to hide. Second, when I first read the abstract, I was uncertain the author could convey the unique experiences of *Candyman*, a monster created out of slavery and anti-Blackness in the United States and *La Llorona*, a monster created by the genocide of indigenous peoples in Guatemala. However, by centering the monstrous body and the mutability of trauma, the video essay maintains their uniqueness while also highlighting the ways in which their pain is caused by similar ideologies of power. The body horror and its connection to Black pain are clear in Ramirez's analysis of *Candyman*. My hesitancy to putting these texts in conversation has subsided, and I see "Monstrous Embodiment in *Candyman* and *La Llorona*" as an invitation to think more critically about transnational embodiments of pain.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

