

cw: murder; child death; violence against children, including molestation; racial violence; gun violence

This is a presentation about mirrors. Not just tangible mirrors, but systemic mirrors, the kind that reflect the cultural logics built into society—the values and biases that underpin economic and judicial systems in order to deny justice. In this, I focus on two murder cases and, in my estimation, why they’ve remained unsolved. I lean on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw in “Mapping the Margins,” primarily to help me avoid treating Ruthie Mae McCoy’s race and Jenny Sue Iles’ class position as interchangeable. They are not the same structure. But both cases expose how institutions sort victims through intersecting assumptions about who is worthy of help, whose status or family is respectable enough, and whose lives can be ignored.

Some of you might remember or know of the 1992 horror film *Candyman*. The movie adapts the 1985 short story “The Forbidden” by British horror writer Clive Barker, shifting the setting from Liverpool to Chicago—and in so doing, it relocates the mechanism of horror from classism and council estates to racism and housing projects. In the movie, graduate student Helen (a white woman) stumbles upon a pattern of violence and injustice in an inner-city (that is, predominantly Black) northside apartment block. Central to the horror is the “monster’s” modus operandi: saying “Candyman” five times in front of a mirror gives him the power to enter through that mirror. Even though knowledge of the murderer and his victims circulates within the community, law enforcement takes little action, prompting Helen to investigate on her own.

As eerily horrific as it sounds, the notion of a monster stealing into someone’s home through the bathroom mirror was not the creation of Barker or writer-director Bernard Rose. In reality, a series of home invasions and murders plagued the Grace Abbott housing project in the late Eighties in Chicago. According to journalist Steve Bogira, the apartments were planned and built such that their bathrooms were connected via pipe chases, or spaces housing plumbing for maintenance access—essentially, behind each mirror-slash-medicine cabinet was an empty space designed for maintenance workers. In reality, this translated into an easy mode of access for criminals to enter apartments, and the Chicago Housing Authority was aware in 1986 that multiple residents had complained of people breaking into their homes through the bathroom mirrors: anywhere between seven and thirty complaints were reported. In April 1987, Abbott Homes resident Ruthie Mae McCoy called 911 to report an intruder breaking through her medicine cabinet; due to either a miscommunication by dispatch or a more insidious assumption that this was just more “inner-city” crime, police responded but did not force entry when Ruthie Mae failed to answer the door. Only two days later did police enter her apartment, finding her deceased, having been shot four times.

I recount this unsolved crime because it illustrates the systemic nature of indignity. In Ruthie Mae’s case, that indignity was rooted in racism: as Black people moved north in the “Great Migration” due to segregation and racial violence, the CHA became less and less inclined

to maintain the apartments of Grace Abbott and the three neighboring developments, and law enforcement wasn't much more motivated to take calls from the projects seriously; according to Bogira, many calls were deemed hoaxes, and police cited the very dangers that residents were forced to live with (broken elevators, darkened stairwells) as reasons for not responding to calls.

Ruthie Mae's case illustrates the same indignity in another unsolved case much closer to home for me, and that's the abduction and murder of seven-year-old Jenny Sue Iles in Covington, Kentucky in 1989. Ruthie Mae was a victim of racism and poverty, and Jenny Sue was a victim of classism and poverty. When Jenny Sue failed to return home after leaving to visit a friend, her parents immediately began searching for her, and they alerted the police that same night. More than a week passed—ten days—before individuals searching for cans to recycle came across her body in an abandoned house. Later, the Commonwealth's pathologist determined that she'd been molested before being asphyxiated.

Her case has resonated and stayed with me not merely because it's gone unsolved but due to questionable circumstances. First, the house where she was eventually found had reportedly been searched three days earlier by the owner, and he reported that her body wasn't there at that time. Complicating the situation, the owner had a criminal record that included dog fighting, and he had kept dogs at that abandoned property; in fact, her body had been mauled and showed evidence of animal bites. Relatedly, law enforcement quickly settled on one unlikely suspect, a man who lived across the river in Norwood, Ohio, and did not drive: Covington police speculated that Michael Funk walked from Norwood, crossing a train trestle, to Covington, to find a victim, abduct, molest, and kill her—a walk of seven to ten miles, which would take around three hours one way. Even after Funk's conviction was overturned, police and prosecutors focused on Funk, to the exclusion of anyone else. Furthermore, in today's age of advanced DNA testing, the evidence collected has never been tested—because CPD improperly stored her evidence: one lieutenant told me that the warehouse where the physical evidence was stored suffered flood damage and damage from rats, so the evidence was disposed of.

All of this is to demonstrate another victim of indignity. Jenny Sue's family lived in a "rough" part of Covington. Extended family members had criminal records, and, in fact, one former officer told me that it was common, when hearing about the Iles family, to ask, "Do you mean the good Iles or the bad Iles?" Even after her parents passed polygraphs, some police officers persisted in blaming them for her death, claiming that her mother, Susan, hadn't cried enough, and her father, Jerry, had cried too much. To this day, the family has not recovered any sense of "normalcy," instead plagued by traumatic deaths, suicide, and addiction issues. I would call her father a broken man, in the sincerest sense (and with zero pun intended).

The mirrors in both Ruthie Mae's and Jenny Sue's cases are literal and figurative. A confounding factor that the police and reporters repeatedly cited was the fact that the only

means of access to the abandoned house was what was effectively a second-story window—too high to be reached without climbing on a nearby cinder block.

So, mirrors abound: glass, bodies, and situations that reflect systemic indignity, or justice denied not *despite* institutions but in service of them—systems that are working the way they were designed to work, to uphold power and privilege. I'll leave you with this: Jenny Sue's father told me that one of the only two things the police returned to him and her mother was the VHS cassette of *Alice in Wonderland*, Jenny Sue's favorite movie—and a movie whose rabbit hole is, itself, a type of mirror.