

**Analyzing The History of Black Women in American Horror**

by

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### **Intro**

I fell in love with horror movies during my last year of high school. They allowed me to get out of my head and enter a universe that made my personal struggles seem much more manageable. Watching a horror movie I would think, “Yeah, I’m not in the best situation right now, but at least I’m not being stalked by some guy in a hockey mask”. As I got deeper and deeper into my obsession, however, it became increasingly obvious to me that I wasn’t seeing many, if any, substantial black characters. It was then that I started to dig deeper to find Black-led horror films. As I searched, I discovered a treasure trove of films that had Black involvement, whether through input from black members of the cast, black writers, or directors. But even in my search for more Black representation in horror, I found that the representation of Black women in many of these films was quite dismal.

What is horror if not a reflection of society’s deepest darkest fears? While watching horror films one constantly finds themselves identifying with the very “normal”, “average”, and typically white protagonists. But as a Black and female horror fanatic, I find that I often have more in common with the “monsters” than these protagonists. This is due to the coding of these characters, while the hero represents the status quo, the villain is representative of the “other”: queer people, women, disabled people, religious minorities, and racial minorities. In this paper, I will explore the depiction of Black women in horror movies throughout the last 4 decades and

examine how these depictions are interconnected in relation to both racism and misogyny.

### **History of Black People in Horror.**

Something that tends to be overlooked when it comes to media representation is the quality of said representation. Simply having Black and/or female actors, Black writers, or Black directors working on a project does not automatically mean that the depictions of the groups that they're representing can't be harmful. Examples of these harmful intraracial depictions can especially be seen in Blaxploitation. In "Blaxploitation Horror Film: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?", Harry M Benshoff defines Blaxploitation horror as "... a horror film made in the early 1970s that had some degree of African American input, not necessarily through the director but perhaps through a screenwriter, producer, and/or even an actor"(Benshoff 31). These films are racially aware and were marketed toward Black people. While through Blaxploitation we were first able to see Black people take charge on screen, these depictions were not often kind to Black people, who were still deemed as "others" in the community. Benshoff describes this phenomenon by stating, "Ultimately, for some viewers, blaxploitation horror films mounted a challenge to the Other-phobic assumptions of the genre's more common reception. However, while appearing to critique white racism in America, most of these films were unable to withstand the genre's more regular demonization of gender and sexuality, which are arguably more deeply embedded as monstrous within both the horror film and the culture at large"(Benshoff 31). Furthermore, they contain heavily misogynistic themes. To truly understand how these films operate we must investigate the time period that birthed them.

### Representation Politics

Black people typically observe representations of themselves in the media in a unique way. In bell hook's "Oppositional Gaze", she states:

When most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy. To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage its negation of black representation. It was the oppositional black gaze that responded to these looking relations by developing independent black cinema. (Hooks 117)

In the case of blaxploitation horror, while there were more Black people involved in the making of these films, they were mainly men. Though Black men know what it's like to exist in society as Black people, Black folk who exist at different intersections of identity may be either overlooked or targeted. Hooks describes this phenomenon by saying :

As spectators, black men could repudiate the reproduction of racism in cinema and television, the negation of black presence, even as they could feel as though they were rebelling against white supremacy by daring to look, by engaging phallogocentric politics of spectatorship. Given the real life public circumstances wherein black men were murdered/lynched for looking at white womanhood, where the black male gaze was always subject to control and/or punishment by the powerful white Other, the private

realm of television screens or dark theaters could unleash the repressed gaze. There they could "look" at white womanhood without a structure of domination overseeing the gaze, interpreting, and punishing. That white supremacist structure that had murdered Emmet Till after interpreting his look as violation, as "rape" of white womanhood, could not control black male responses to screen images. In their role as spectators, black men could enter an imaginative space of phallogentric power that mediated racial negation. This gendered relation to looking made the experience of the black male spectator radically different from that of the black female spectator. Major early black male independent filmmakers represented black women in their films as objects of male gaze. Whether looking through the camera or as spectators watching films, whether mainstream cinema or "race" movies such as those made by Oscar Micheaux, the black male gaze had a different scope from that of the black female. (Hooks 118)

Black Women have historically been underrepresented and stereotyped in horror films since the genre's debut in American cinema. I will examine how Black women are represented in Black-led films throughout the past 4 decades. In order to further explore this dynamic, I will engage in close analysis of several films.



In *Abby* (1974) we are first introduced to professor and archaeologist Dr. Garrett Williams. He informs his students that he will go on an archaeological dig in a cave in Nigeria. He goes on to describe his interest in the Eshu cult as what has led him to want to explore the cave. In the film, Eshu is described as the “most powerful of Earthly deities”, a chaotic god of sexuality, and a trickster. Dr. Garrett is well admired by his students as they go on to name his achievements, including a doctorate in theology. The students then give Williams a going away present: a large cross necklace. After a brief montage, we are taken to the infamous Eshu cult cave. Surrounded by his dog crew he calls out for assistance after he discovers a wooden box carved with an image of Eshu. The doctor then goes on to open the box, unleashing a whirlwind of harm and destruction to everyone in the cave as a monstrous face flickers throughout the scene. We are then brought to a suburban neighborhood in Louisville Kentucky where we are introduced to the film’s namesake, Abby, as well as her mother. Abby is a warmhearted, church-going, and very generous person. Besides being the wife of Dr. Garrett, she also has a full plate, balancing being a marriage counselor, a youth worker, and a choir leader. We start seeing changes in her behavior when she starts becoming more of a sexual and cruelly

outspoken person, saying extremely vulgar things to the people around her. She starts foaming at the mouth while at church and having extramarital affairs with men she knows as well as strangers. These behaviors signal to the other characters that she is “demonic” and needs to be cured. At the end of the film, Dr. Williams exorcizes the demon from Abby, returning her to angelic nature. Benshoff describes this trope as “... the genre’s usual demonization of women and nonpatriarchal sexualities.” Noting the likening of a sexual woman to something monstrous (Benshoff 40). The portrayal of Nigeria in this film feels disconnected. In the credit montage, we’re shown urban areas in what is assumed to be in Africa as well as rural depictions, but there aren’t Nigerian characters besides Eshu. Even though important parts of this film take place in Nigeria and elements of the Yoruba religion, it feels divorced from its cultural context. We also see othering and demonizing of the Yoruba religion specifically in regards to Eshu’s followers in comparison to Christianity. Eshu’s followers were described as a cult that “rejoice in evil and violent acts”. This demonization can be seen in this film's relation to sexuality, specifically female sexuality and gender roles. For the duration of the film, Abby is described as a dutiful homemaker. She’s extremely hard-working, doesn’t complain, doesn’t drink, a caricature of a “good Christian woman”. Almost immediately after Eshu possesses her it is implied that she imitates sex with her husband, him noting that her skin is oddly cold as he caresses her arm, signifying a change in Abby. This sequence works to suggest that Abby’s sexual desires are demonic. Throughout multiple points in this film, possessed Abby flirts, seduces, sleeps with multiple men, and goes to the club, which is almost treated on the same level as the murders and assaults she commits in her disturbed state. In response to this portrayal, Benshoff stated “Abby's appetites were figured as grotesque and in need of eradication.” A woman being

promiscuous or simply being sexual was framed as horrifying. Harry Benshoff went on to explain why this film took such an aggressive approach with this conservative and religious framing, detailing that:

...this film allowed its script to undergo revisions suggested by African American input (a move AIP made to appease critics of its earlier blaxploitation films). BoxOffice noted before the film was released that it "will be avoiding some of the clichés about black people and will be more in line with the present thinking of CORE and other groups about how they should be portrayed on screen." Perhaps these revisions were responsible for the positive depiction of black Christian religiosity, but they were at the expense of demonizing women, sexuality, and the Yoruba god Eshu, who herein becomes steeped in a Western, sex-negative Christian ideology. (Benshoff 40)

These script changes may have been the cause of the glorification of Christianity over the Yoruba religion as well as the demonization of Black female sexuality. This exemplifies the hegemonic belief that those deemed "others" are monsters who should be punished/saved.

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*Eve's Bayou* (1997) begins with an adult Eve Batiste stating "The summer I killed my father I was 10 years old." She then continues to divulge the events leading to his murder. Black women play an integral role in this film as reflected by the mostly Black and female cast. This film mainly follows 10-year-old Eve, her mother Roz, her father Louis, her aunt Mozelle, and her 14-year-old sister Cisely. The family resides on land by a Louisiana bayou, which was gifted to their ancestor who was a freed slave named Eve. She was bestowed this land after saving the life of her enslaver with her powerful medicine, then bore sixteen children for him. The bayou grew into a close-knit community of different vibrant personalities. The opening scene, in which we are brought to a party being held at the Batiste home, introduces us to the many dynamics at play in this close knit-community. Eve Batiste is an adventurous and clever young girl who feels overlooked as the middle child. Roz Batiste is a stay-at-home mother who struggles to please her children while also struggling with her husband always being away at work. Louis Batiste is a celebrated doctor with a penchant for infidelity. Mozelle Batiste is a supernaturally gifted woman who finds herself to be cursed in love. And Cisely Batiste is a prim teenage girl full of admiration and care for her father. In this film, Eve finds out that her father had molested Cisely, her sister. After this Eve seeks to use witchcraft to kill her father with the help of local fortune

teller and witch, Elzora. At the beginning of the film, we see Eve and Cisely exist as normal kids, she's adventurous, playful, and is always speaking her mind. This is in stark comparison to her older sister Cisely, who is a very prim, proper, and uppity girl who loves her father. These differences in personality cause a lot of contention between the two siblings, often sparing to win their father's attention. But after Eve discovers that their father has been having an affair she is pushed into the position of protecting the rest of the family from his secret. Over time Cisely becomes more and more withdrawn from her family and begins to act out. The family assumes that her personality shift is due to hormonal changes from puberty, which Eve is dismissive of. One night Cisely decides to confess to Eve the true reason for her erratic behavior, she was being sexually abused by their father. After learning this, it's almost like Eve's childhood comes to an end. She is no longer preoccupied with typical childhood experiences and is on a search to find a witch who will help kill her father. Unfortunately, this story rings familiar for many young Black girls who are forced to grow up too fast due to the material realities of existing as a part of disadvantaged groups. Neither of the girls are forced to portray themselves as a "strong black woman", a stereotype that Black women are uniquely able to "bear tremendous burdens"(Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman* 6). We see them grapple with a multitude of emotions. This story is told from Eve's perspective, allowing a significant amount of depth for her character. We get to understand and observe her meaningful relationships with other Black women and girls throughout.



*Wendell and Wild* (2022) is a stop-motion horror film about a young Black girl named Katherine “Kat” Elliot, whose parents owned a root beer brewery in her hometown of Rust Bank. When she was eight years old, Kat’s parents tragically died in a car accident after she screamed and startled her father, causing him to veer off a bridge and into a body of water. In this film, we also see glimpses of an underworld and two demon brothers who inhabit it named Wendell and Wild. Five years pass following the car accident and Kat has deeply internalized the trauma and guilt from losing her parents, causing her to lash out and become a troublemaker. After being put into a group home away from her hometown after her parents’ death, she is given the chance to start anew at an all-girls Catholic school located in Rust Bank. On her return to Rust Bank Kat is met by “Klax Korp ” flyers plastered all over what was once a buzzing town. In Kat’s first class, she meets Raúl, a trans boy whom she ends up befriending, and her teacher Sister Helley. One night Wendell and Wild contact Kat in her dreams promising to bring her parents back to life if she summons them to the world of the living. Kat ends up having to overcome her personal

demons (trauma stemming from the death of her parents) in order to save her town from being demolished to make way for the prison. At the beginning of the film, we see Kat as a young child, right before the death of her parents. She is beaming with joy, but her happiness is short-lived. After the car accident, Kat internalized all of the blame assuming she'd hate herself for the rest of her life. While at the group home Kat became increasingly troubled, even being bullied. We see Kat suffer from a panic attack when returning to her hometown, when she receives emotional support she shuts people out, leading her to appear as shy and cold. When Siobhan tries to befriend her, she immediately shuts her down, and when she feels that her space is being invaded she pushes her. Throughout the course of this film, we see Kat get closer to and eventually befriend Raúl, slowly opening up to the people around her. Wendell and Wild represent Kat's internal demons: the guilt she feels over her parents' deaths, severely injuring someone, and being institutionalized at a young age. In order to save her town, she needed to face her past. Once she accepts herself and her past she is able to save herself and those around her. As a character Kat is able to grow and show multiple sides of herself, being edgy at times and vulnerable at others. Kat is allowed to be multidimensional in ways that we don't tend to see with Black girls in horror or films in general at times. Kat is allowed to grow beyond her troubled past and her pain. Despite powerful figures deeming her a charity case, we are constantly reminded that she is more than that. She isn't a one-dimensional portrayal of an "angry black woman", which is a stereotype that Black women are "combative, loud, and/or aggressive". (Simmons 51) Her pain manifests in different ways, however, that isn't all she is in this film. This film diverts this stereotype, not by stripping her of anger and any negative emotion, but by allowing her to exist beyond that.

## Preparations

I explored some of these concepts in my senior project, a short animation. This animation is on a much larger scale than any previous animations I had done, short GIFs created in Photoshop and Illustrator. This project would also utilize my skills in drawing and painting. Art has always been one of my strong suits, but I had placed it on the back burner to focus on my schoolwork. For this project, I would not only have to learn how to animate but also reconnect with my art practice. In anticipation of this project, I found myself watching anime. I would examine every shot, often rewinding to note how they portrayed the movement, the backgrounds, and the framing. Casually watching something and watching something to learn are two very different experiences. When I would casually watch anime, I wouldn't pay too much attention to the technical side of things, only noticing moments that were especially excellent or extremely bad. When I was watching these shows to learn, I felt like I had to remind myself to pay attention to the minuscule details, e.g., pacing, transitions, and angles. I found that the marker a lot of times of an animation being successful is not noticing it. So I found myself becoming frustrated that I would miss these small details without considering the fact that I probably wasn't supposed to notice them as a viewer. That's when I learned that good work doesn't need to be in your face and obvious for it to be good work. And that brought a lot of relief to me as a first-time animator: I was ultimately aiming for the mundane, not something very in your face. But it may actually be harder to get something to look "mundane" than it is to make it pop. Viewing these shows impassioned and fascinated me with 2d animation procedure, though the amount of information one needs to familiarize themselves with was daunting. Through research, I gathered various resources, mainly Youtube tutorials aimed at animation novices. Youtube proved to be a

bountiful resource as it is easily accessible to educators and students alike. Immediately I was faced with a multitude of different choices concerning animating programs. I saw some that I was already familiar with like Procreate and Photoshop, but I also came across unfamiliar programs like Clip Studio Paint. I began the process of researching various animation programs and different drawing programs that I could utilize. I had already purchased Procreate and was somewhat familiar with the interface, but I continued to search for a more streamlined program that could make this process easier or my art look better. I knew then and I know now that at the end of the day, the program isn't what makes the art. You can buy 1 million tablets and download dozens of different brushes but it is your technique that makes or breaks your project. I did a great deal of research comparing all the top apps. Some programs like Procreate have layer limitations, and some programs were specifically made for animating while a lot of the others were not. I decided that I would mainly be using Procreate. I was already familiar with its layout, it's easy to use, and I'd already paid for it. If I did face any limitations with Procreate I decided that I could use it in conjunction with another program to make things go smoothly.

After getting past the program issue, I was forced to recognize something about myself: the fact that I was terrified to start my project. I was using research to avoid creating. I would spend my time looking up tutorials and art references instead of putting pen to paper or in this case pen to iPad. Starting projects has always been the most difficult part of projects for me. It didn't help that I wasn't very experienced in this medium or animation as a whole. I knew I had a lot ahead of me but I just didn't know where to start. At this point, I was starting to feel the pressure from my advisor and also my classmates, seeing how far along they were. I already had

my character model, which was an old sketch made months prior. What I needed to work on was my storyline. I never considered myself a strong storyteller. I enjoyed reading stories and also watching stories, but I never felt confident in my own abilities. I could analyze a story and extrapolate meaning from the scenes, but when it came to creating a story myself my mind went blank. I had taken a creative writing class before, But it was traditional writing. Visual storytelling felt like a completely different form. Knowing this I decided to be honest with myself about my abilities and aim for something simple. This wasn't me giving up, this wasn't me choosing an easy way out either. I needed to come up with something that I would successfully be able to animate in the amount of time that I had.

### **Beginning Stage**

In my story, the unnamed main character would be sitting in her room watching horror movies on her laptop amid a thunderstorm. As the horror film reaches the climax, lightning strikes the laptop, and the main character is transported into the world of this scary movie. Our character becomes the star of the film she was originally watching. Earlier in my planning I decided that the first film I was going to feature and rotoscope the main character into was going to be Abby. Rotoscoping is a technique of tracing over live-action footage one frame at a time used in animation (Rotoscoping). The main character is teleported into the scene which coincides with the height of Abby's possession. In the scene I was planning to rotoscope, Abby was attacking random civilians leading up to her father-in-law exercising the demon from her. I chose this scene in particular because of its horror factor. It also represents the immense change the character goes through. In my beginning stages, I also planned to incorporate multiple horror films into my project. But I overestimated how much time I had

and underestimated how much time rotoscoping would take.

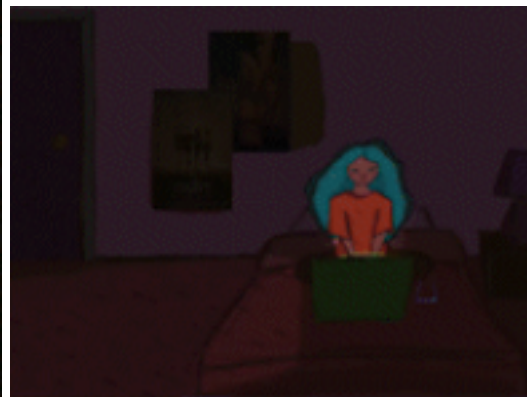
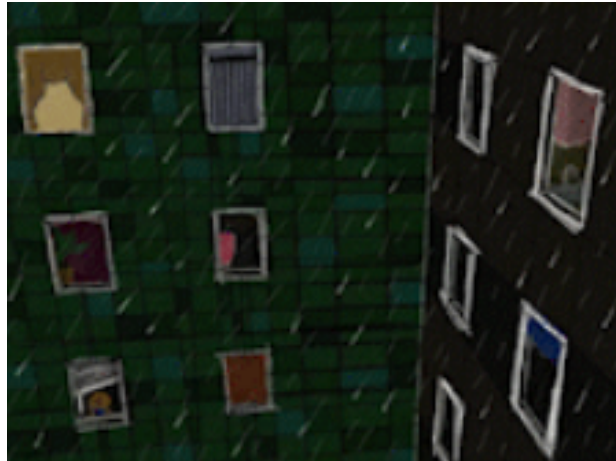
Now that I had decided on my storyline, I moved on to the next step which was storyboarding. I needed to bring my ideas into the physical world. This allowed me to organize my ideas and also understand them in new ways. At this point, it was necessary for me to start working on the order of my story and the shot compositions. These two things can really make or break a project. If the ordering of the story isn't done well it can lead to confusion for the viewers. If the shot composition is off then it can ruin the atmosphere. My goal for my short story is to have it start with a cozy atmosphere and conclude with an unnerving one. I looked to many animated and live-action films for inspiration, in regards to the tone. For storyboarding, I simply sketched out my scene progression ideas in Procreate.





### Middle Stage

After getting past the storyboarding step, I began my animations. The first animation that I worked on was also the first scene of my film. I wanted the scene to open with a shot of a creepy apartment building, where our main character resides. Drawing architecture and different perspectives has always been a struggle for me, but with the help of online references, I was able to make a building that made sense compositionally. I also utilized a mellow color palette to match the tone that I was aiming for. My first animation for this project was in animating the raindrops and lightning in the opening scene at seven frames per second. After completing the intro scene, I moved on to the bedroom scene. The main character would be sitting in her bed entranced by what was appearing on her screen, with light from outside peering into her room. What I tried to pay special attention to in this scene were her facial expressions, the lighting, and the decor. I wanted viewers to be able to see how fascinated the main character was with horror by the excitement on her face as well as the horror posters on her wall. The lighting was also extremely important in regard to the mise en scène. I wanted the coziness of nighttime to overlap with the creepiness of the film she was watching as well as the gloominess of thunderstorms. The longer I worked on this project the easier things came to me. As I made more progress I would look back on my previous work and realize all the different ways I could've gone about it. I may have done something in a much more convoluted way than it needed to be done, or I would notice small errors in my work that I needed to fix. So even if I thought I was finished with a part of the project I wasn't, there was always something that needed tweaking.



I continued to work on my animations and rotoscoping. One thing that I did not anticipate for this project was how time-consuming rotoscoping would be. I did know that animation is very grueling work as a whole but I didn't truly understand until I started my project. With my regular animations, I wasn't basing them off anything else so I was able to repeat frames as much as I wanted to, only needing 12 frames per second at most. But when it came to rotoscoping the most I could get away with was animating on twos, which was extremely strenuous considering I had to work with 31 frames per second. In "Animation: The Mechanics of Motion", Chris Webster explains animation timings saying,

"...animation on video is seen at a rate of 25 fps (frames per second), so the number of

frames you choose to shoot your animation on will determine how quickly (and smoothly) your animation will appear. Shooting your animation on ones will give the smoothest result but is time-consuming to make. Shooting on twos will be a lot more economical and only slightly less smooth... A lot of commercial animation is shot on twos (two frames per drawing), as this is a relatively economic way of making animation (half the number of drawings than making a drawing for each frame) that results in fairly smooth action”(Webster 208).

I tried to make this process easier on myself by slightly tweaking previous frames instead of re-drawing the entire pose. Doing this helped a lot in regard to time management and my sanity. This process was so repetitive I felt I was going nowhere. I would spend the day completing 30 frames only for it to be one second in the grand scheme of things.

### **Final Stage**

In preparation for senior review day, I put together a draft of my short film. I was experiencing technical difficulties in regards to the editing software (Adobe After Effects and Premiere Pro)resulting in my video missing its Foley and the editing being unorganized, but it still represented the direction that I was heading in. For my sound design, I downloaded free audio and tweaked them using sound editing programs, one being Audacity. When using free sound resources, the quality of these audio clips can be questionable. I mainly used editing programs to sharpen or silence segments of audio. I also made use of those programs instead of utilizing audio tools in Premiere Pro, as to prevent my computer from crashing from high RAM usage.

My personal computer did not have the capabilities of running those programs without crashing so I had to rely on school resources. This was also difficult in the fact that I'm a commuting student so my access is limited. I had to do my editing in large chunks at a time instead of working in smaller sections due to my travel and time limitations. But I was happy to have something to be reviewed. This was a daunting experience because I was so wrapped up in my project and knew the ins and outs. Since I was working on this project for so long, my eyes lost their freshness when it came to my project. I needed a different perspective from someone who could inform me if the plot was understandable and where it should go. During my review I found myself having to explain the plot more in-depth, it turned out that the plot points that I thought were easy to read weren't to people on the outside. The committee members were also interested to see where it could end, as

I wasn't too sure how I would wrap up the project. This made me settle on an idea. A week or two before the senior review I discussed with my advisor and decided that I would only be using one horror film in my video. I had a lot of ideas but that was before I truly understood how much time went into this work.

After my critique, I spent time working on my story's continuity as well as finishing up my animation. I worked on ways to make the scenes flow into each other better and more smoothly. I spent more time editing in Premiere Pro and in After Effects, slowly getting more accustomed to their tools. I also worked on fixing the sound. I would scour the Internet looking for royalty-free sounds to use in my film. Freesound.org was a great resource for this and is where I found the majority of my sounds. I wasn't looking to add music to my project but for

sound effects. I was very particular when it came to my sound effects, especially the storm-related sound effects. The sound of the rain was very important to the mise en scène, it couldn't be too high-pitched or too low-pitched, and the ferocity of the storm in the sample had to match that of my animation. After working on the sound and placing it in my project, other than some slight edits, I was at the finish line. I then had to decide how I was going to present my project for the exhibit. I initially wanted to have a screening for my film but after class discussion, it was decided that we did not have enough people who wanted to take that route. I wanted to have a screening because of my sound elements and also because a dark atmosphere would pair well with my film. Having previously exhibited video work in the Passage Gallery I was familiar with how sound travels in that space, and I was concerned that the details that I worked on sound-wise weren't going to be noticeable with traditional speakers. I did consider using a pair of headphones connected to the projector, but due to a lack of equipment availability,

I had to use speakers. To set up for the exhibit I simply had to connect a thumb drive to a portable media player. I ran into an issue getting my video to play, which was solved by lowering the video resolution. At the show opening, I was very fascinated to see how my film would be perceived in that room. Due to the nature of the space, I felt that the sound traveled poorly and it was slightly difficult to hear what was happening unless you were standing directly under the speakers or if chatter happened to die down. Although I felt there could've been improvements on that front, people still understood and enjoyed the film. I found that I grew immensely as an artist during this project and that it opened the doors for me to pursue more in the realm of animation.

During the exhibit, an older Black man walked up to me and was entranced by my piece. He went on to explain how he saw the film I referenced, *Abby* (1974), when he was younger, and how he grew up watching Blaxploitation films. He was shocked that I was even familiar with this movie, asking me where I found it. At that moment I felt honored that Black elders were able to connect with my project in this unique way. Having grown up in the new millennium, I wasn't able to experience Blaxploitation at its height, and I also had a lot more access to substantial representations of Black people in film. Being able to stand by that gentleman and watch my film from different generational perspectives brings to mind how quickly our representations are transforming right before our very eyes.

Link to Short film : <https://youtu.be/cNQk7QZb1lg>

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