>> Diane J. Wright: So hello everyone. Welcome to RespectAbility's "Black Excellence" filmmakers panel, in honor of Black History Month. I am Diane J. Wright, and I'll be moderating today's conversation with our filmmakers. I am a middle-aged biracial black woman with pulled back hair. I'm wearing bold glasses and a bright top. Behind me is a RespectAbility backdrop, and my pronouns are she and her. So a bit about me, so you know who I am, and then we'll we'll get into introductions. My career as a ghostwriter and creative consultant spans over 20 years now. My work now combines filmmaking and advocacy for the black autistic community, using entertainment to better our lives. I am a Canadian American of Afro-Caribbean descent, here to nurture a conversation on creativity and inspiration and on lifting up our voices as black disabled filmmakers of multiple intersectional identities. We'll be taking questions from you, the audience, during the second half of the panel -- second part of the panel, and please add your questions to the Q&A box when we ask you to do so. So, let's meet our panelists. First I'll call on Nasreen Alkhateeb, if you'll turn your camera on please, Nasreen?

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Hey there. Hey, good afternoon on this very rainy day. My name is Nasreen, I use the pronouns she, her, and her. I'm a first gen black Iraqi disabled queer director. I was born in Oakland California, and I was raised Muslim, currently based here on Tongva land in L.A. I'm sitting in a gray chair, with an olive long sleeve shirt. I have long, curly, tightly wound brown hair. I create content for film and television behind the camera that focuses on normalizing intersectional realities, and I lean heavily into disability, gender, and racial equity.

>> Diane J. Wright: Thank you Nasreen. And Nikki Bailey, will you turn your camera on please? Hi Nikki!

>> Nikki Bailey: Hi, I'm Nikki Bailey. I am a black woman with pink hair, and I'm wearing a striped shirt, and I'm sitting in front of a blurred background. I am a filmmaker, I am a writer, performer, director. And I live in Pasadena, California.

>> Diane J. Wright: Welcome Nikki. And Tameka Citchen-Spruce, would you please introduce yourself?

>> Tameka Citchen-Spruce: Hello everyone I am a -- my pronouns are she, her, and hers. I have brown skin. I'm wearing like a lime green top, and lime green earrings. I have long black hair and I am a disability justice activist, independent film producer, and screenwriter.

>> Diane J. Wright: Thanks Tameka. Over to you Erika, Erika Ellis?

>> Erika Ellis: Hi, my name is Erika Ellis. I go by she/her. I'm a light-skinned African-American. I have just like brownish-goldish hair, a multi-colored sweater. I'm also a Navy veteran, an actor, a writer, and a producer. And I live down here in the South Bay close to the beach.

>> Diane J. Wright: Nice, thank you Erika. Cashmere Jasmine, you're up.

>> Cashmere Jasmine: Good afternoon everybody. My name is Cashmere Jasmine. I am a writer, director, and producer. I create film and content that does discuss identity politics. I am a black woman with biggish curly afro textured black hair, in a purple sweater, sitting in my living room.

>> Diane J. Wright: Thank you Cashmere. And Juliet Romeo?

>> Juliet Romeo: Hello, I am Juliet Romeo. I am a brown skin, Caribbean descent -- I have Carribean descent -- afro-caribbean woman, sorry, I'm slow -- I got a little confused looking at my hair, because I have purple hair and a tie-dye seafoam green blouse. And I'm in my office in Miami, Florida. I am a writer and director. I create documentaries and narratives that support advocacy and disability -- telling disabled stories. I'm also the founder of Slamdance Film Festival's Unstoppable program that supports and promotes diversity and disability film -- and uplift disability filmmakers.

>> Diane J. Wright: Wonderful, thank you everyone. And I'm so excited to have this conversation today, because we are all quite good friends, I think, and this is an important moment anytime we get to come together. Today, while we do have discussion points, this is a free -- free-flowing conversation that can't really be neatly divided, so do chime in as you like. I will call on everyone at least once, but feel free to talk. We have about 40 -- 40ish, 45 minutes. And I'll ask for a five minute bell from our supporters to -- when we're closing in on time for Q&A. All right? Okay. So in preparation for today I was thinking about what I wanted to talk about with you, because we get the same sort of questions all the time. So I turned to the AI gods and I put in -- I fed it the question, "what should I ask a panel of black filmmakers?" And of course I got back the usual points about our identities, of being hurdles, and what we should -- do to make that less so, and how do we express our culture in our filmmaking. And then I took out the word black, and I asked it what to ask a panel of filmmakers. And it gave me back questions about inspiration and creativity and execution and reaching your audience, and I think that says -- pretty much, it sums up our lives as filmmakers. It's important to express ourselves and our identities, but also, we're filmmakers, right, and it's all -- bundled up. So I want to talk to you about that today. Let's start off by talking about, given that we see so few of our faces on screen over the years, what inspired you to pursue a career in filmmaking and in the entertainment industry, and we'll start with Erika, if that's okay?

>> Erika Ellis: Alright. What inspired me?

>> Diane J. Wright: Yeah.

>> Erika Ellis: Looney Tunes cartoons.

>> Diane J. Wright: Go on, tell us more.

>> Erika Ellis: Well okay, so I always wanted to be a voiceover artist. I'm still striving to accomplish that goal. But watching Looney Tunes growing up and all, you know, cartoons, I was like "I want to be a cartoon character!" And then, when I started watching 80s action films, I said, "I want to do that!" I want to make those type of films. And I got it. I mean, it was, you know, it's male dominated, but I still felt as though I want to make that, that's -- and I write -- when I write, I write, like, action. I've been told I can write, you know, good action sequences, because most people don't expect females to be able to write action sequences, as if we don't know movement. So I -- yeah, like those buddy, you know, action comedies, Lethal Weapon, Tango & Cash, all that, that's what drove me. But I am going to give credit to Looney Tunes, because to this day I still want to be a cartoon character.

>> Diane J. Wright: [laughs] Excellent, I love that. Cashmere?

>> Cashmere Jasmine: Well I wasn't allowed to watch a lot of TV growing up, but what I did watch was a lot of sitcoms. And I didn't know how much it impacted me until I started creating that stuff that just comes out of you before anybody else has a chance to make comment on it - those first big scripts you write and those first shorts you create. And they were "A Different World" and "Family Matters" and things like that, but filtered through kind of what my experience had been, which was what is it like to be someone who has these different intersectionalities, whether it be dealing with disability or dealing with being brought up or surrounded in all white spaces and making those transitions, those code switching, that -- the things that go unspoken. And then as I grew up in actual cinema, I realized that there were some really interesting motifs that could be used to express those that are purely cinematic, that aren't necessarily written or spoken, but truly felt. And that's what I aspire to be able to create.

>> Diane J. Wright: Excellent, excellent. Any -- one more and then we'll move to the next question if you like?

>> Juliet Romeo: Well for me, growing up I always -- I wrote a lot. I would make characters for all of my friends, and they'd want to sit around and listen to me read it. So I knew that I liked being creative, but I always say that if I -- understood and knew that this was a career, first I wouldn't have went to a school for medical professions, and then try to go to medical school. So it was a lot of time wasted at that part. But it was something that always drove me, and it was in my -- it was my passion, it was my wheelhouse, so -- but when I finally came into it was because I was inspired by a friend to tell her story and her journey about sickle cell. And from then, the doors kind of opened and I was able to start to create more stories, more documentaries.

>> Diane J. Wright: It's interesting that you -- you make me think that, like, how many of us thought as little kids that this was a viable thing to do, or even came across -- did any of us have that thought?

>> Tameka Citchen-Spruce: Yeah. For me, yeah I was always drawn to the arts since I was like a little kid, and my mom, I was -- like, she tells the story sometimes that I begged her to take me to audition for the orphan Annie, because, like, I want to be Annie, I want to be, you know, on stage and stuff. And so they always had that, you know, the arts choir, you know, later theater, and those type of things. I was really naturally drawn to the arts. And I did get a lot of pushback and discrimination until I met a theater professor in community college that, you know, really gave me a chance. And I brought a one act play, and then it kind of, you know, and I got to film later on from that, so -- but I was always trying for the arts.

>> Diane J. Wright: That is -- such a wonderful thing to know where you're you're headed, whereas I think some of us had to go in other directions and find our way, sort of, here. And I'm gonna move on to the next question, but feel free if you -- if anyone I didn't ask that, if you want to tell that, please do in a moment. So I wanted to talk about some of the specific ways the industry could have risen to meet us. So as I said, we're always asked about our identities as barriers and how we overcome them right, as if -- who we are is a hurdle. And practically it can be, but I mean, we still are here, we're still filmmakers, we've still made our way in some circuitous route. So thinking back, what are some of the ways the industry could have risen to meet you to make it equitable, to make it easier for you just to be on par?

>> Erika Ellis: I just want to say that even though I had the passion growing up that I wanted to go into entertainment, I didn't initially. So I went around about, you know -- I wanted to do finance and I had it in my head that I get in finance then I can finance films, and then I can put myself in a film. But I didn't know a direct route. Like, I didn't even -- I didn't even think about classes at colleges or anything. I just figured I had to get a traditional job and then hopefully work my way into that. And then I was, you know, I was on par. I went to the military to help pay for school, then I was gonna get out, and September 11th hit, and I had interviews at Wall Street, and then that all changed. So I -- I found my way, the long way, I should say. But growing up I still didn't know how to get there. And I think when I finally did -- I got through like through another, you know, organization, a diversity hire basically in a program. And I just think that if people put -- it out there, like, I've met people who are disabled now who still haven't told the people that they work with that they're disabled. Like, I'm non-apparent, and I've met other non-apparent people who don't even tell their staff that they have, you know, diseases. So it makes it hard for me to think that I can stay in this business, let alone get in it, because I had always had a fear that if somebody found out that I'm sick, they're gonna fire me.

>> Juliet Romeo: I think with the representation, what they can do -- what the industry can do is -- could have done to help us is create representation, exactly what we're trying to do now, right, because I feel like if I saw myself, or I saw that there were writers and directors growing up that look like me, then I would have believed it. I'd have been like, yes, this is what I want to do, right? Like honestly, I -- yeah, I wanted to become a doctor pretty much out of revenge, because I had a doctor that stuck me all the time when I was three. So from the time I was three, I've been saying I'm gonna be a doctor, right? But that's really because that's the main thing was my illness, in hospitals, doctors, nurses, that's what I was exposed to, so that's what I knew, and that's -- I was like, okay, that's what you do, right? Then that's something my mom decided to do, which by the way, she became a nurse because of, you know, she needed to take care of me, right? So this was all the exposure that I had -- and not a person that's to say -- not any family members saying hey -- they always complimented me on my writing, my poetry, anything I did that was artistic, but they never told me I could place it somewhere, and it was probably because they didn't know either. Coming from a, you know, Caribbean family, you know, they -- come to America and they're like, we're gonna go work, we're gonna do this, we're gonna, you know, basically -- and the safe jobs are -- you know, in a medical field, so become a nurse, become a doctor, right? And they're all over my family, so it was the only thing that I knew. And it wasn't even that I was being pushed to do it as much as I didn't know that there was

>> Diane J. Wright: [crosstalk] I think what you're saying is -- I think what you're saying is that not only representation on screen, but representation in terms of seeing a pathway to being what you can be.

>> Juliet Romeo: Absolutely.

>> Diane J. Wright: Yeah.

>> Nikki Bailey: Hey, I also think it's important to -- one of the things that I wish had happened for me is if there were people in the industry who were interested in mentoring more. So not only the representation, but -- but the relationships once you're in the -- in the industry. So at my first job in television, there was only one other person of color on the staff, and she literally said to me don't close my office door, I don't want them to think we're in here conspiring with each other. And like, it was really -- it took years to, like, find another person of color that I could work with, you know, that was -- working with, that I could be friends with, that you know, that I could build relationship with. So like -- and one of the things I think is so great now is that, you know, we all help each other -- we send each other resources, we -- introduce each other to people, and I think that's one of the -- the beautiful gifts of an organization -- like RespectAbility bringing people together so that we can sort of build community and relationship, so that as new people come in, as we advance in our careers, we're -- helping each other and helping new people who are coming in as well.

>> Diane J. Wright: Absolutely. And not just mentorship on a -- like, we also need to see those who've come before, but there's so few -- of us in senior positions or positions of power, is what I'm looking for, to reach back and give us a hand up. It's because this is becoming so new, we're in this place where -- and correct me if I'm wrong that it's -- it's almost majority peer mentorship helping lift each other up, which is fine, which is good, but it's not what others get to experience, I think, for a lot of people. Okay.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: I think when people think about hiring, we know that there's inherent bias, and that's -- that's a really -- big barrier in terms of getting folks hired, especially in terms of leadership positions instead of support staff. I've -- I've worked in so many different positions where they're sort of -- I was hired because they were kind of forced to, like, bring someone of color on board, bring someone -- bring a woman on board. So it's not always the most comfortable. But then on the other hand, I look at folks that have hired me in the last few years who went searching for something different, someone that doesn't look like them, someone that's not reflective of their own upbringing. And that's -- I mean I look at those situations and I kind of dissect them, and I'm like, you know, where did you find my work, what made you want to reach out to me? That -- is really what I want to share with, you know, more executives is -- step outside your comfort zone. Think about why you're hiring who you're hiring. Do they look like you? Did they go to the same school as you did? Did they come from the same sort of suburban town that you grew up in? When you look at other people you're hiring, what makes you uncomfortable about that person? Ask yourself these questions. It's not an easy question to ask yourself, but if you ask it, at least you're -- you're now leading towards, oh, this is why I'm thinking this person's a safer bet than this person.

>> Tameka Citchen-Spruce: Yeah, I 100 percent agree with what everyone said. In particular what Nasreen said resonated with me, because I came into film specifically during 2010, when [indistinct] based out of Detroit Michigan. So Michigan had [indistinct] like major movies and studios and everybody was coming here to Detroit to do film and TV and such. That's what these -- that I learned or that was told to me that, you know, people hire based on people they already worked with. It was kind of like a good old boy club per se. And so unless you know -- if you don't know people that's hiring or know people that's in the industry, there's no way you're gonna be able to get anywhere like that. So you know I -- as a result I was able -- I took a class and I got on the set, you know, that -- was part of the field [indistinct] -- the film class, but that was one of the things they really focused on. [indistinct] [indistinct] you know, go outside your network, and you know, hire people who are different.

>> Diane J. Wright: Which is a risky proposition, right, which is why people don't do that already without being pushed to do so, because a known quantity is safer for your job, for your reputation, and all of that. But we do need -- we do need people to make those introductions, even if they're not going to be involved ultimately, make those introductions. Reach out beyond your circle -- and just like we're talking about, make those connections that we are not able to make for ourselves, because we're not in those established circles yet. So let's move on to talk about your artistic vision a little bit. How do you balance your view of the world that you want to put on screen with these conditions we're talking about like risk aversion and even DEI quotas and those sorts of things that are on top of our -- just the already difficulty of getting your vision on screen -- does that make sense? A little circular -- but Cashmere, what are your thoughts on that?

>> Cashmere Jasmine: I identify with that in almost a painful way. I think that my experience has been very split, so you have the work that I feel like I've created on my own or with my community, and there is this purity of vision that you get to just put yourself on the screen and at RespectAbility where it was actually watched by a group of people to see -- to see people nodding and laughing -- that was the first time I thought, oh wow, I was able to reach inside of my brain and, like, suddenly people saw it. And then to go to other experiences like where we are dealing with studios and we're dealing with executives and we're dealing with people who have an idea of what it should look like. And it's a -- and I hate to say it's a lack of trust, but it is that they have a formula that they know has quote unquote "worked for them," and it's often somewhat exclusionary, or often may be overly conservative. And the balance is knowing what you are going to try to fight for and what you can compromise on. Because eventually building that relationship is -- they will start to trust your instinct. And also to never stray completely from those opportunities, to have your purity of vision -- because that's what they're trying to buy. They want your lightning in a bottle, even if -- when they have it in front of you, they want to try to filter it towards something they think they recognize. So it is continuing to show that your lightning in a bottle is bright, and worth pining for and working with, and proving in the end that -- this was not only beautiful and profitable, but unique and really reached not just the audience you're used to reaching, but an audience that's even broader than that.

>> Diane J. Wright: I love that, I love that. And there have been instances, especially recently where blockbuster films have come out and made massive amounts of money, but then where's the next one and where's the next one, even -- I say that because we're fighting as independent filmmakers, but even those massively funded and distributed worldwide blockbuster projects still are one in a very -- you know, long long interval.

>> Cashmere Jasmine: I can't help but -- there was both relief and a deep deep sadness when I heard Viola Davis speaking on The Breakfast Club about just getting people to do hair and makeup, and that it was always going to be a fight, and that you'll always have to push, no matter who you are or how high you go. And then to also watch that they never received what I believe were awards. I walked away from the screening at TIFF, and I -- there -- it was an uproarious crowd and people were like, "this is the real Marvel movies, we need more of this!" And to still have a whole industry not truly recognize it, it's both -- it puts -- it makes me pause, makes me a little bit afraid, but then it's also that we just have to continue pushing those doors open. But it did make me feel good to know we weren't alone, that someone as big as Viola still had to work that hard.

>> Diane J. Wright: Yeah. How do you keep that from affecting your creativity when you're just sitting down to even conceive of a project? How do you -- how do you keep the fire alive, knowing that --

>> Juliet Romeo: That's such a good question because when you just said, Cashmere, that it made you feel -- you felt a little sense of relief that even Viola Davis has the same struggle, right? But for me it's like, "oh my gosh, Viola Davis gotta struggle, I don't -- that means I have to do it too, that means when I get to Viola Davis status, this is what I have to look forward to?" Like, that is what waved across me. Maybe my anxiety is different than yours, but that's what I felt, and I was like, okay -- no -- so it's like, what can I do to make sure that the person behind -- that -- I feel like Viola Davis already gave us -- the gap was probably longer for her, it's not going to be as long for us. And so we can keep pushing too and get to where, you know, these other amazing black -- black women and black artists are doing for us, and kicking these doors open. It took them longer to do it then it's going to take us because of what they did, so we need to just persevere so that the next person, you know, is not just closer but hopefully, you know, we want to strive for they -- you know, the door is being opened and opened for them all, like, what door. Like, I want to get to the point where there's like, what door, just come on in, you know what I mean? Like, just create.

>> Erika Ellis: [Crosstalk] I just -- I wanna get past trauma. I wanna get past the trauma porn. I want to get to -- like I said, I grew up on action movies. I want to write and produce movies just like those movies I grew up on, but just with a, you know, diverse cast -- a more diverse cast or a black female lead. Why can't we just be the black female -- I mean the 70s -- 60s and 70s, we were kicking butt. I don't know what happened between that era and now, but we were kicking butt. And then we got to the trauma. We got to slave movies, we got to, you know, that. So I just want to get back to just regular movie -- just anybody could be in that movie, just write it so that anybody can be in it, but of course I'm gonna put a black female lead in it. But I just -- could we just get out of -- it's like a musician said, he can put out a whole bunch of, like, R&B love songs but won't get played. But rap music putting out hatred and shooting and, you know, violence, it'll get played all day. So if I put out just a regular movie no one's gonna want it. But if I put out oh I was a slave and, you know, and I overcame, and -- they're gonna put that out. So we have to just overcome that.

>> Juliet Romeo: We got to stick to our authenticity, you know? I think that's the -- Grace -- that we talked about. I think that's what it was was, that they stuck to what they decided to do and how they decided to do it, and it didn't look like what, you know, industry standards were. But they didn't care. They just did it anyway and kept doing it. Like, I have to remind myself that all the time when I look at something and I'm like, oh my God, this is like nothing I see on TV right now, or nothing I've seen -- I have to remind myself, like, it's not supposed to -- you know, it's not supposed to, because it's yours. That is that person's and this is yours, you know? I had this guy tell me one time, like, I was telling him about a story I'm working on and he's like, "that's been done." No it hasn't. It wasn't done by me. You know? So I mean no one says stop putting out phones, you know, or stop, you know, putting out anything that someone all has already done. And it's not even about doing it better but doing it [crosstalk] with someone else.

>> Diane J. Wright: Let's talk about that for a minute. That's a great point, Juliet, about pitching our projects and being told we had one of those already, or it's not -- it's not black enough, or it's not whatever enough, or you know, we had a woman director, it didn't work out, so -- blah blah blah. Not -- I'm not asking you how to change that, because that's not our job to change that. But what would you like to see? What would you want to happen? Like, how would you like those conversations to go down while still honoring who you are?

>> Tameka Citchen-Spruce: Yeah, so -- and I will add maybe a little bit more to the previous conversation, but just, you know, listening to everyone, you know, from my point of view, and I'm coming from, you know, like a grassroots because, you know, being a disability justice activist working in nonprofit and advocacy, so I'm really like grassroots level, like, what person am I thinking, and so it's like, you know when -- it's best to be, you know, passionate and even if you get the nos, it's just like, if you're passionate about it and its just keeping you at up at night, like this story has to be told, I would just encourage people just to do it anyway, and to -- and to build partnerships, like, with community and, you know, and go and make movies for the community. And people would appreciate that. They will support it. And then it would create hopefully so much like a fireball that the industry had to take notice. Similar to like with Tyler Perry, I know the people do like, oh, Tyler Perry, but you know, the way he did it -- as I remember at the very beginning, you know, he was doing the plays, going to, like, churches, going to different places, and you know, he just built a community of people that loved his work till it just came to the point that Lionsgate had to come, you know, was begging at his door, and now he's, what, like a billionaire or so? It's just, you know, if you're passionate about telling the story, just tell it, build that community, and do it anyway.

>> Diane J. Wright: And we do have to shout out to the black filmmakers who are doing that. Most successful actors do have production companies that they're -- and many of these places have initiatives in them. But, you know, it's for one or two people a year, because they can't take on too many more, because they also have to pay for things. So it's like, we're doing well within our communities. It's outside of that that's letting us down a little bit.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Right, exactly. When is Black Excellence not excellent enough? I mean, I look at -- content like Lovecraft Country that was canceled after one season. That was an excellent show. That was the best TV I've seen of all TV in the last 10 years. That was incredible writing and character building. Look at High Fidelity. High Fidelity took up a known -- this was not a risk, right? High Fidelity was, you know, a success when it first came out. It was a success when they redid it with a black woman lead. It was hilarious. She was hilarious in that. And no season two. What? Like, when is black excellence not enough to just keep going? Because everyone I spoke to loved Lovecraft Country, they loved High Fidelity. Maybe not as much as me, because I finally got to see a representation of myself on screen, but -- yeah.

>> Diane J. Wright: Yeah, good point Nasreen. Nikki, it was -- it's on my mind that I know -- you work a little bit in comedy. And if I remember correctly, I remember you saying something like people coming back to you with -- that they read your work and don't get the jokes, and the jokes aren't for them, do you know what I mean? Am I -- can you talk a little about that?

>> Nikki Bailey: Yeah, I mean, you know I write for the people -- I write for my people [laughs]. And so -- the jokes are not necessarily for everybody, and everybody's not going to get them. And so, you know, I -- I have a a pilot that I put on the Blacklist -- and it got reviewed, and I could tell that the reviewer was not a person of color, was not a black person, because they didn't get, like, they didn't get a lot of the jokes. They just went [whoosh sound] right over their head. And I was like, you know, a black reader would have gotten those jokes. And it's one of those things where -- where the cultural significance of the writer is as relevant -- should be where the cultural significance of the writer is as -- is relevant to the reader -- and it should be that that should somehow be part of the process of evaluating the work that, you know, we we don't -- we don't read in a vacuum. We don't experience entertainment in a vacuum. We don't, you know, we don't -- watch television in a vacuum. We watch it all through the lens of our own experience. And it matters to know, you know, who's -- who created this, where does it come from, what is it born out of, and that makes a difference to how we then take it in. So yeah, I don't -- I don't write, you know, like the jokes aren't universal, and that's okay. It's, you know, everything's not for everybody. And what we -- what we're finding out, when we see a lot of shows -- when we see shows like Lovecraft Country, you know, canceled, or you know, they just canceled South Side on Netflix. You know, when we see shows like those get canceled, what we're seeing is that they don't value black audiences, and so -- and so that -- which means that they don't value black artistry in the same way either.

>> Diane J. Wright: Right, it brings up the -- what is the standard we're being measured against question. Like if -- if you're submitting your work or presenting your work to a production company, but they don't have representation in the company, they're measuring us against some other thing that is not even -- that's not the audience that we're talking to. So there's that as well that we have to sort of coax our way around with every project.

>> Juliet Romeo: Yeah.

>> Cashmere Jasmine: And I think there is or there are subsidiary production companies and pods that are trying or are interested in the content that we have. I think, like, with the Onyx Collective at Disney, with all black streaming, with -- I think Paramount has one too. I don't want to speak to it like it's the next coming, because I do fear, and we should fear and be very aware of ghettoization of it, of being paid less or what goes with that ability to finally be distributed and have access to an audience that appreciates us, and also have a production company/studio that also values us. But it is once again an opportunity. And I do don't want -- and I want to connect that to some of the reasons why we had 60s and 70s were crazy, the 90s, why we had these, because we didn't have to, or they didn't think we would, and we didn't have to compete with all of that, those audiences. They were happy to have the niche black content. And I think they ignored the broad appeal, except for when they were stealing it from Living Single, but I think there is [laughter] I think there is just -- there are opportunities but it comes with a double-edged sword.

>> Diane J. Wright: Yes, yes. We have a few minutes left. We haven't really even touched on our disabled intersectional identities, right, on disability, but let's think about emerging filmmakers of all ages, all locations, people with this burning fire to be creative, right, and listening to us, and let's try not to bring them down. [laughs] But what thoughts do you have so that tomorrow, when they pitch their project or conceive of a project, they can bring themselves to the screen and feel like they can they can do this thing, right? What -- what encouragement or guidance do you have? Tameka? [crosstalk] Sorry Juliet.

>> Juliet Romeo: Oh me?

>> Diane J Wright: Go ahead, sorry, I meant Tameka.

>> Juliet Romeo: I would say -- [laughs] that was funny because I forgot what I was gonna say now.

>> Diane J. Wright: [laughs] That's okay.

>> Juliet Romeo: To lean in, yeah, to lean into the passion. Keep -- and keep working because, like, that leaning into it and who you are, that's what I'm saying -- lean into who you are, because this identity and being honest with who I am and putting that into my work helped me to not just love myself more, and have just self-love and understanding and grace for who I am, but also that I'm sharing that with my audience, and that I'm putting it -- into the story, I'm making it my own, you know? So I say just lean into who you are and what the disability is, because there's a community out there that's there to support and they also want to be identified.

>> Diane J. Wright: And with specificity, right, they can go into the details. Don't just be broad about the city you live in, like, what is your actual life like? That's the newness that -- that's always interesting. That's good, thank you Juliet.

>> Erika Ellis: I just wanna say -- [crosstalk] I just want to say I did my short story because before my RA, my rheumatoid arthritis was controlled, I had a lot of flare-ups. So when I would get out of my car, I would drop my keys. And so -- I would park in the parking lot, well the garage was kind of dark. And so I would drop my keys, and then my head, because I love horror, I was like, what if somebody were to open that back door and just, like, kill me? And I remember I told my mother, like, I keep dropping my keys. And she's like, you better stop that, you gotta watch that. So I used that. I used my experience, I used my disability and thought of -- even though I put it in a, you know, realm of horror, I thought of that, you know, the person, you know, character drops your keys, and lo and behold, the killer gets out of her back seat. So use -- I mean, use your disability. Use what you know. Like, make -- I mean, I know a lot of people are, like, record stuff, just videotape everything, just make everything. But some people still uncomfortable with that. Write it down. Just write it down, or -- like, I use, you know, I use my phone to record stuff I'm thinking about. I'll do a whole scene and, you know, just burp it out just like blurt it out, you know -- if I don't feel like writing it down, I'll do a whole scene and record it, and come back later, or just, you know, send it to someone and say, hey, listen to this. So I mean, just use your experience and just, you know, create.

>> Diane J. Wright: So tell your story, use the tools you have, don't wait for others to give you permission. Any last tips before we get to Q&A? [crosstalk]

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Yeah, find other filmmakers that share your values. It's a lot easier to work with -- you can't make television and film alone. You can't make it in a vacuum. But if you find production partners and a film gang that supports your vision, that shares your values, it's going to be a lot easier to get through that production day, because they're gonna -- they're gonna be willing to take as many risks as you are.

>> Diane J. Wright: Absolutely, I love that. Love that. Okay, so thank you all for that. We have a couple of questions to get to. So I invite the audience -- if you're in the audience, please add your question into the Q&A box, if you have something you'd like to ask any one or all of us. And for our friends watching on Facebook, the comments are being moderated and questions will be shared with us here on Zoom. So one question we have so far is what are some important stories or messages that disabled black females have made, or should make or tell? So what are some important stories that we as a community need to share?

>> Cashmere Jasmine: Dating, old and disabled, and black back. [laughter]

>> Juliet Romeo: You took my response, you took my response! That's, like, literally what my short is -- what my new show is about too, dating with a disability. But yeah, I want to see more romance. I want to see more -- more disabled leads where they are, you know, the romantic lead, the -- I mean I, as a programmer, I have seen a lot. And I have seen action films with disability representation. It's out there. And if it could -- you could send me a short with that, there is no way we cannot do a feature film. Like, why isn't it out there, why -- like the things that I see -- come across at, you know, Unstoppable, I cannot believe that it's not, you know, already a feature that has not been picked up, that -- it just doesn't make sense. And so -- that's what I want to see more of, those -- the one place you don't think you're gonna see, you're gonna see it in a way -- in that way, and you're gonna believe what you're saying too, because -- authenticity is what it's about, so -- [crosstalk]

>> Nikki Bailey: I want to see a dark comedy with a black disabled female lead. I don't know what it's about, I just want to see, you know, like, some kind of quirky weird comedy with, you know, a black female disabled lead. And I want to star in it, so there it is, you know? [crosstalk and laughter]

>> Tameka Citchen-Spruce: For me, like what everyone else has said, I have said. And also I would say to show the humanity, you know, all of it, like the good, bad, and the ugly, like, just the humanity, because, you know, just the -- and of course, you know, part of the human experience, because I think, you know, when people, you put that on screen and show the relatability and the rawness, the beauty and also the challenges of -- all of the messiness of everything, you know, it will be great.

>> Diane J. Wright: Absolutely. We have another question. When you found your passion of storytelling, how were you able to practice it and continue to improve your skills? So given that filmmaking is a collaborative money intensive endeavor, how were you able to continue to push through all these years? [crosstalk] Sorry, Nikki?

>> Nikki Bailey: Having community is a big part of it. Having people who I write with, pet people who read my writing, who, I read their writing, people that I break down movies and television shows with. I'm also a stand-up comedian, so performing stand-up comedy and having the opportunity to work through material that way, and just continually writing. Always, you know, always be writing, always be practicing that way, and having the opportunity to flex that muscle is really important for me.

>> Juliet Romeo: Yeah, everything that you said. I knew it. [laughs]

>> Diane J. Wright: So how about you Nasreen, I'm thinking about your career behind the camera, which relies on people hiring you to do the big shows -- how did you continue to push through over the years?

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Always creating, you know, again, leaning into that finding your film gang. Some of us meet peers at school, some of us meet peers, you know, in our neighborhood, or at work. Finding another person that maybe shares the same interest in genre that you do. My entryway into the industry was through Monster Makeup. So I found other people who were interested in that genre, and we made short films together. And we submitted those to film festivals. And that just kept going. So you know, each time you broaden your network, it gets a little bit bigger, because then you're connected to a new person who's connected to an entirely new network. So just keep finding folks, whether it's through community activism or whether it's through school, that will help you make your film and your -- your shorts.

>> Diane J. Wright: Excellent point. And for some of us for whom finding community is difficult because their disability keeps us at home or keeps us at more distance than other people, there are still organizations like RespectAbility and others that you can find your way to connect with, and they will support you as RespectAbility supports us. So there's always a way, right? So we're -- we're getting close to time. I think let's -- let's end on an up note, shall we? Thinking about the production companies out there led by black filmmakers, films that have been coming out, some of the changes on the networks in terms of packaging black content to offer that's easier to find, what are some of the exciting things that you've been seeing. What excites you right now in the industry? And if nothing's the answer, you can still respond.

>> Erika Ellis: I love seeing black horror. Like, I said I grew up, like you know, all these movies, Blacula was probably my favorite movie growing up. [laughter] But so I like -- you know, like -- put it out there, like we're not -- we can do it all! Like, we can do it all. We can -- we're -- well we're naturally funny, but horror, you know, the ongoing joke is that, you know, black people in horror film won't last five minutes, because we'll be out the door. But to show, like, just different types of film, I like that we -- we're doing like the -- the drama -- like the soap dramas, like, you grew up on, like, Knots Landing and stuff like that, Dallas and all that. And we're starting to do stuff like that. And I love, like, I don't know -- the problem is a lot of stuff isn't being advertised. So I would tell people to watch All American and All American Homecoming, they're good! They're like soap operas. And I grew up watching Days of Our Lives, and that's about it, because I really didn't do soap operas. But I -- I like that. I like that we're doing, you know, like just 30 minute, you know, shows, and that they're depicting regular, you know, lives, nobody's -- it's not all stereotypes, it's just, you know, people living their lives. And yeah, I think it's good that we're just -- we're putting it out, we're putting the content out there. [crosstalk]

>> Diane J. Wright: Oh, sorry, go ahead Tameka.

>> Tameka Citchen-Spruce: Well I'm really excited about -- I love, like, The Black Panther, I love how they -- how they do it with that -- what they do with that, but also, like, Woman King, and so I would like to see, you know, excited to see more content like that showing what we were before slavery. You know, I like to see that more.

>> Diane J. Wright: Nice, I would like to see that as well. [crosstalk] Nasreen, what's exciting you right now? Oh, I'm terrible at moderating today. [laughter] All right, Juliet, go for it.

>> Juliet Romeo: I was gonna say I'm excited to see more black in tech stories, like tech, science that is done well, no tropes, like that -- I want to -- I get really excited when I see those type of films in theater. It's like, yeah, I just believe that this is this person -- they are building this scientific robot that builds bombs, whatever it is they're doing, I believe it. Like, I like to see us in those spaces, I guess. I love the -- love the blurred, I love them.

>> Diane J. Wright: You can't be what you can't see, right?

>> Juliet Romeo: Right, right.

>> Diane J. Wright: I think maybe one more, if we have time for one more. What's exciting you in our industry right now, or what's, you know, what's on the horizon?

>> Cashmere Jasmine: Well I was really impressed and excited by -- because hopefully it was opening doors for the type of work I like to do -- is a show called "Send Help" about a male Haitian actor who's trying to rise up, and is dealing with his own mental health issues. And a lot of it involves this really interesting surreal imagery. There was a great Sci-Fi show that got shut down before it got out, but it was called "Damascus" and it had a primarily black crew, and we were going to get blank on -- Viv back on TV and so -- but these work exists, and hopefully will be funneled into these other places -- where they could live, because I -- I want to see them, you know what I mean? And then once again, I have -- like, Erika, I love the horror too, and we have so many black female leads right now, like, whether it be Barbarian, what, bones and all. I mean, I'm not saying they were the smartest leads, but I am enjoying seeing these black women, like, kind of kick ass, or fight it out to the end, be the final girl. So I'm here for it.

>> Diane J. Wright: Yeah absolutely. And even in terms of cinematic vision, like, to assume that we have a limited palette that we like to look at, or a limited view -- like, we are everything, so we can bring everything. Just, yeah. I'm excited to see that coming as well. So thank you esteemed filmmakers. Thank you for sharing yourselves with us. This has been a lovely conversation, I'm so excited that we did this. I'll thank the filmmakers: Nasreen Alkhateeb, Nikki Bailey, Tameka Citchen-Spruce, Erika Ellis, Cashmere Jasmine, and Juliet Romeo. You can look up their work. I highly encourage that you do. And I want to thank our ASL interpreter today, Lindsay, thank you for your amazing keeping up with all this. It's great. And to the RespectAbility team who's also keeping up with all this, Lesley Hennen and Isabella Vargas. Thank you everyone. And thank you in the audience for joining us, and for, you know, being filmmakers. Keep your creativity flowing, we need you. We need your voices, we need your stories, and take the advice to heart. Put yourself on paper and on screen, and hopefully we'll see you out there soon!