



SEASON 1, EPISODE 2: A (NEW) CULT OF PERSONALITY

<https://www.blkirl.com/episodes/anewcultofpersonality>

FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

BLK IRL 00:00

Hello, I am Anuli Akanegbu and you are listening to the Black in Real life podcast.

MUSIC 00:10

[Intro music: "Wild" by Garth.]

BLK IRL 00:24

The influencer marketing industry is a multi-billion dollar industry. Yes, a big B, and that B stands for billions. But if you're Black and want to see some real cash, you won't always get a chance. At least, this is what the conversation has been for years, and what the conversation continues to highlight today. As Black content creators begin to increasingly demand more from brands, media organizations, and marketers. These content creators want more equity, more compensation, more recognition and overall more respect about the contributions of Black people to not just internet culture, but the popular culture at large. Today's guest Shamira Ibrahim argues that the exploitation of Black people and Black creative labor are essential to the inner workings of the influencer marketing industry. Shamira is a Brooklyn-based culture writer, by way of Harlem, Canada and East Africa, who explores identity and cultural production. As a critic reporter, feature writer and essayist she has had bylines in publications such as the New York Times, The Atlantic, Fox and Teen Vogue. I was introduced Shamira's writing through a column that she used to write for VICE's Broadly vertical called, Extremely Online, where she wrote about different aspects of Internet culture, including the influencer marketing industry. I find the way that she writes about Internet culture to be extremely thoughtful and nuanced. I thought that her perspective as a cultural writer, who also has had experience working in the technology industry, will contribute nicely into the conversations about internet culture generally, and influencer marketing, more specifically, that I want to facilitate the season. Here's how each episode will work. In each episode, I'm going to share a brief introduction to the subject of the day before introducing my guest. At the end of each interview, I will come back to share a few key takeaways that stood out to me from our conversation. These takeaways will be supplemented with research from both academic and non-academic sources. To add further context to the subjects that are brought up in the interview portion. For every episode, I will include citations to the reference materials I mentioned, as well as some additional background reading for you on the black in real life website, visit www.blkirl.com to nerd out. Okay, now without further ado, let's get



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into my conversation with culture writer Shamira Ibrahim. I'd like to start by talking about the column you did for VICE's Broadly vertical, Extremely Online because that's actually my first introduction to your work was that column. So I was curious as to how the idea for the column came up.

SHAMIRA IBRAHIM 03:26

Yeah. So the idea for the column came up a couple of ways, right? I was introduced to VICE to Dani Kwateng who is now the cultural director at Teen Vogue. And we wanted to figure out how to create a space that talked about what was going on in digital media and social media and Black culture in a meaningful way. And kind of right now, when people talk about the intersection of tech and culture, right, which is what everyone's doing now. But we were all doing years ago, right. And the reason why I felt like I could talk about it meaningfully, is that my background is actually not only do I write but actually have a background in tech myself, right. So I have done project management, I've done it. So I think some of the sticky spaces and what we discussed and cultural writing is that we get to talk about, you know, how black people, you know, break the internet, how we break these algorithms, and we break trends, but we don't get to really dig into how they really screw us over in a meaningful way. Right. And I threw my back on get to understand the fundamentals of that because I've been working on projects before the work in AI. I've worked on projects that deliver some of this work. And so I understand actually, what the objectives of some of this technology is, right? I've been to panels I've delivered presentations around business intelligence and data science, right. So I really wanted to just get people to understand that we are the product. We are what's selling. There's nothing that is free on the internet. And, you know, there's nothing that is net neutral, right? So there's no such thing as anything that is impartial. It's all built on biases we're the architects of it. And when we as creatives get to create things that we think is just, you know, the matter of self-expression, but that gets manipulated to generate profit. And we don't realize that because we're sitting there thinking, Well, hopefully somebody sees it us as our talent, and offers us the bag, right? And we are the bag, then how do we really get to understand that and realize how this is a long trend of us getting manipulated and exploited. And it's just been, you know, we purpose in the midst of the digital age. And that's how we wanted to start to talk about just the space of internet culture, tech culture, why it bleeds over into other spaces. And so we started in, you know, the social space. With regards to gaming, right? We started with talking about dances and gaming, and how you know, BlocBoy JB's dance, the milli rock, all the artists are out here. With these video games getting exploited and not getting money's worth. There were some white influencers who were actually becoming a brand ambassadors for the game, right? We expanded that talking about the space of brands,



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once there was and how, how that game was rigged, and how the algorithms continue to mess up and shift people up and down and how you can get monetized and de-monetized in various ways and how the game is constantly cagey and some Black beauty influencers feel like they just get pushed out of the industry as celebrities start to wait their way into the industry. And they have no real power, about how their revenue streams get, you know, accelerated. And that continues to this day, right? There was a recent story around GloZell about how GloZell was everywhere. And, you know, and GloZell recently talked about how she went broke, right, she just went from being at the top when she was in the White House, and talking to Obama, right, and then, you know, she went nowhere. And that's not an uncommon story, right, you can mention that with Antoine Dodson, you know, who had the viral, you know, clip about hide your wife, hide your kids, right? You know, all these stories around how people who become part of Internet cannon become memes and that becomes fodder for people to profit off of or are, you know, entertainment, and then, you know, distant memory about what happens to them, we don't care, right? And so, just talking about how they can have short lived lives, but other people can be millionaires for know what we perceive as no discernible reason, right? It's like, Oh, they just sit online and look at whether or not you know, you perceive that as labor or not, right, because having seen what some of them do to make content, I cannot put the amount of work they put on to create a digital space to that level, because it's it is a lot of work to constantly generate an aesthetic, right? Like, you can't even go out without documenting everything to a level of effort that I cannot put forth. Right? But that's how we kind of started to shift and like see how we can engage in these discussions and say, yes, there is an algorithm as to how they see the trends are what is worth engaging, what is more aesthetically pleasing, and what is happening. And you know, and they amplify those things, right. And it matters in so many other material ways, right? We were starting to talk about, you know, the column got discontinued, because Broadly, you know, the vertical kind of disbanded, you know, through VICES' acquisition but we started to start discussing and expanding into what was happening in the music industry and how they were struggling to pay artists equitably? Because there's difficulty with independent music artists and finding out who owns the mechanical licenses, right? And if you can't know who owns your mechanical license, you can't pay them out equitably. Right. And so people like Rah Digga didn't get their royalties for ages. Right? And discussing why that happens, why it's a lot easier to someone like Rah Digga that's just, you know, like a major pop artists right for their money, right? Because Taylor Swift can get online, right and start campaign and say, Hey, I deserve to be, you know, reimbursed for everything that I've done for, you know, major record labels a Scooter Braun [inaudible] and let's get everybody on board, right. But how do you talk about how that trickles down in these databases and how there's no real, actual condensed space to pay attention to young Black



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artists or even legacy Black artists and fight for their space? Right. So where do we create a, and now, there is actually legislation working towards creating a major database for Black artists so that there is accountability and you can say this person has 10% publishing this person has 5% publishing and you have to pay them out equitably.

10:00

That's going to take years to come to fruition, right. So these are the conversations that we were trying to have to say, this is what happens when we try to figure out our digital footprint, some places is very well documented, some places very sloppy, there's no real effort to even try to put together because that requires a level of accountability that they've been getting away with for a very long time. But the reality is, is that technology moves at a pace that is way quicker, and iterates way faster than legislation and social conversation, right? So people are innovating faster than we can ever legislate our way to account for it. And so we have this kind of vague, you know, moral code of like social policing, and Black people will always get the short end of the stick if we just allow for that. And so we have to have the conversations publicly. So that's kind of why we have that column, right? Because if not, who gets to protect the quote unquote, culture, if not us? And thank you for that answer. Because you touched on a lot of points that I do want us to cover in this conversation, which is a really great, your answer just sounds like a really great overview for what's happening in internet culture. So one of the things you were talking about was brand influencing. And I do want to hone into one of the articles you wrote for the online column about the dark reality of being a brand influencer. And in that article, you're talking about how the brand influencer model was, has become inverted with individuals, you know, marketing themselves to brands and PR agencies as products. So based on your research for that article, and just your overall knowledge, as a culture writer, and even in the tech industry, can you describe what it means to be an influencer? Yeah, I mean, it's kind of taking the idea of the cult of personality to, you know, the ultimate extreme, right, and we're seeing it in a variety of ways, even present day, right, you know, only fans in the pandemic has become the ultimate kind of manifestation of the cult of personality, right? It's extended way past the idea of quote, unquote, sex work, or, you know, seeing people share their news to a subscription service, right to say, like, it's kind of like, you can account someone's level of clout, right? Are you willing to subscribe to just the mystique of my personality to see are you willing to see me cook eggs? You know, because you don't know the tier of service is going to get? Are you just willing to actually engage in my day to day life? Right? So it's like a separate level of influence for a lot of these celebrities. But in the discussion of, you know, that specific lifestyle what an influencer is, it really is just cult of personality being packaged and monetized and seeing, this is what I'm worth, because people will adopt a



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product off the strength of my word, right. And that is really what it is in like its base level, what it actually really started as was the level of just social influence in clubs, right. And so the tastemakers in the club scene are bouncers and bartenders, and people who in the music industry are the people who get to talk to a lot of people in the industry, right? So he goes to the clubs and Lower East Side in New York, or you go to the clubs in the village, right back in the 90s, and the heavy rock era or whatever, when Nirvana was huge. Those of you the bartenders who were actively still pushing cigarettes, right. So, you know, the big cigarette companies, the big tobacco companies would try to make deals with bars to have the bartenders per specific brand cigarette, this is after they were settling all their lawsuits, right. So so it was a kind of actually really in the way out, and so they were trying to still retain their profits and their relevance. So that was how bartenders became influenced marketers right now. It's not just like this big demographic of people, it's individual people and how they can sell themselves. So it's, oh, I am a James Charles, right? I just have the strength of having 3 million followers on YouTube and x million followers on Instagram, that generate this many impressions, right? Just by me holding up this random product. People will know it and people will go out of their way to check it right. And this will convert to clicks, this will convert to sales. And this is the deck that I present. I'm literally selling myself and my influence and my persona, right. And so that's what influence an influencer is at this point, it's who I am my engage ability, my likability and whether or not I am bound to be believable to the people subscribed to it. As that kind of niche has expanded. That sort of metric has adjusted over time, right. So customers are savvy followers are savvy, right? So people will now more so be like, Well, we know that you were paid to do this. It doesn't feel as organic anymore, right? So now you have to figure out the bounds of Well, we know that there's no product

SHAMIRA IBRAHIM 15:00

that you're showing that you weren't on a PR list for so how do we believe that you generally like this? Or you don't like this, right? How do we believe that now you're a legitimate millionaire, and you're getting paid and all these branch trips, how which which segment you're sharing is because you wouldn't maintain a relationship for yourself versus maintain authentic relationship with us as a consumer? So these are conversations that now we're involving, and they're still trying to manage, as this niche no longer becomes like this sort of way to disrupt the market. And it's like alternative marketing and is actually now the standard way to cut through the digital space, right. So it's no longer subverting anything. And it's becoming, if you want to run a new campaign for a product, you have to send to these PR lists of a million people, right? So you can't do anything without, let's say, sending Kylie Jenner an unboxing video, right? Like, that's the standard app. And she's going to charge, let's say, six figures for a



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post and five snapshot, you know, or Instagram Stories of her unboxing it for your benefit. And so that is no longer something that is necessarily going to take you over the top. So how do you actually take over the top at this point?

BLK IRL 16:09

How do you think COVID-19 has impacted the influencer industry?

SHAMIRA IBRAHIM 16:15

I think it's fascinating, right? Because you can see some places still trying to figure out what to do. There are still travel influencers still trying to travel, right. And I've been watching that play out, because I mean, you'll still see people in Cabo, for example, or to loom right showing pictures of them on vacation. And it's this weird sort of dissonance, because, okay, you're living this fabulous life in this deserted island. And both, there's workers there for you, right, so you're putting workers in a bad position. We can't travel there. Obviously, we have no aspirations to travel there right now. So there's no sort of way for us to feel like this is something aspirational, we can go and book right now. So you're being paid a lot of dollars invest in this resort, that no one is actually going to make any reservations for anytime soon. So there's a lot of people spinning their wheels, trying to figure out how to maintain relevance and resonance in this time, you know, the idea of hyper consumption is really sort of confusing a lot of people because there are people who are going to sit in this space and say, well, you're entitled to joy and leisure. Right? Which, of course, right, you know, you can't just sit and sit in misery and anxiety. And I think that it is about that some people are figuring it out. But when your entire brand is focused on not engaging with any of the things that are going on, and the nuances of going that are going on in present day, not even in your own industry, right, how can you engage with the things that are going on publicly? Right? So, you know, in the influencer industry itself, right, like, there aren't white influencers, I don't go out of their way to amplify black influencers, or, you know, there are those that don't go the way to discuss if you're a beauty influencer, alright, diversity shades, or, you know, amplifying Black Beauty brands or being on the PR list of smaller brands or independent brands, and being able to amplify them. So to go out of their way to even try to grasp the discussion on a greater scale, when they're so focused on retaining a capitalist mindset, even just for their own careers, now, they're kind of stuck, trying to figure out how to retain relevance, right, because a lot of people's energy is so consumed in trying to figure out how to move forward day to day, right. So that engagement has shifted for many of their fan bases and consumers, right. Some of them do want the distraction, and some of them are not invested in distraction. And so I've seen some people's content, try to shift to, at the very least acknowledging it, and some of their



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followers say, this is disingenuous, you know, you know that you don't care about black lives. So why are you doing this, right? And some people's content has shifted towards just being consumed in drama. And so that it's just following, you know, a lot of bickering back and forth, because there's not much else to really engage in from the, you know, commodification perspective, right. So if there's not much to do from actually discussing products or selling wares, then it becomes, okay, let's do drama. The ugliest part has been the really disturbing copy that gets touched a lot of these influences. So it'll become I know, I need to be able to get away from this pandemic and just go on the road. And I need my Toyota Camry to take me there. Right. And it's like, okay, that story about that, right? for us. The copy is, is obviously just canned and provided by a publicist, right, and kind of your level of, you know, caches influence or you may have the ability to adjust the copy or not, right. So, when you see those sorts of things, that's when it starts to really sink in, you know, how much the machine needs to still keep going for some people, right? Because what in your right mind convinced you that anyone would want to sit there and, you know, say, Oh, yeah, watching black people die and across the country makes me want to buy a Camry, right. But that's just the brand partnership that they have. And that was the best way they thought that they could integrate a campaign that applies the current moment. And so these are the sorts of flash points that you points that you see kind of playing out that almost make you feel bad for people not bad enough for me to, you know, sympathize that much, because they're still making way more money than I will probably ever see in my life. But um, you know, in the context of realizing how hamstrung a lot of these people are to a certain lifestyle, or a certain business model that they cannot escape from, right? They're committed to selling and pitching products. And when that is happening, all they can do is pivot their model to pitching themselves to putting more products and that's a very, you know, like, that's, that is just a very disappointing place to be in when we're all watching all this play out day to day

BLK IRL 21:16

because we see it play out on a lot of Instagram pages like influencers in the wild. I don't know if you've seen that page in it yet. But like these types of like he said, hamstrung attempts at trying to be an influencer and live in that life, which I feel like has led to the vilification of the word that I just noticed, even when doing work towards this project, a lot of people who may be influencers, by definition, do not like that word. You know, they go by some other title, like content creators, storyteller. So just based off of just everything you were sharing Now, why do you think the word influencer has become so vilified, that it's associated with type of like insensitivity or rapidness? That other words like content creator, storyteller may not be at this? Yes,



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SHAMIRA IBRAHIM 22:03

yeah. I mean, influencer has kind of become reduced to essentially that, like a salesperson, right? So influencer has almost been reduced to something that is synonymous with, I don't want to say a snake oil salesman. But you know, when certain verticals of wellness and health and beauty started becoming synonymous with certain products that were documented to know not to have any material benefits but were still being fished. Right. So there were popular verticals, or niches of products, such as hair, vitamins, such as, you know, obviously, you know, tummy tees that are well known right, products that don't actually generate any material gains, but feed in a lot of toxic structures that are, you know, manipulating certain beauty constructs and our communities, especially in our patriarchal structures, then it started becoming Okay, this is really about generating profit and material gain at the expense of your fan bases. And I do have a certain level of empathy for that just because a lot of these influences are women, and some of them do take the products themselves. And I do think we should really acknowledge those power structures when we discuss it, because, you know, women have their own insecurities and their own toxic trees that they own, and they internalize that they may present to others, but I think that's what it started becoming a level of distaste towards the, you know, the word work campaigns were being constructed towards influencers having little care towards what products they were pushing towards others, as long as they were generating return. And when that's already becoming the assumption, that's when people who felt like they were more discerning wanted to move away from accepting that label, right? It's, I'm more conscious about what I'm trying to actually adopt. And, you know, create a space for my following, I am more intentional about the platform I'm creating, and what I'm trying to actually generate in the community. And so I consecrate or looking, or I'm a storyteller, or I'm a change maker, you know, so all of these other terms that are still in a lot of ways, similarly, they write on a creative or whatever. So it's still a similar kind of buzzword, but it's still trying to, you know, imply that you are moving towards forward change, right, moving towards positive action and generating something more productive as opposed to, you know, doing something that is, you know, kind of pressuring or influencing behavior in a way that now has kind of implied either not neutral or sometimes, maybe not negative returns for the people who are kind of consuming it constantly. Right. You know, influencer, you know, sometimes if you search on Google will be influence or drama, influence or tea, you know, and so, all of that can sometimes just starts to coalesce and have people assume that you're either going to get a huge bag At this point, there are like a few people at the very, very top who have it, right? There's not there's not much space to become a millionaire at this point, right? By the time that you try to enter that game, it's too late. And so it's a lot of people now competing for literally



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returns. So how do you kind of shift out of that? Right? And that's difficult, right? Unless you're really willing to come in through, you know, a different route, which is, let's say, attached to a celebrity and then pivoting that way, right. That's like the more common route these days to pivot into, quote unquote, influencer lifestyle, right?

BLK IRL 25:36

And even celebrities themselves are doing

SHAMIRA IBRAHIM 25:40

exactly right. So it's like, oh, this person became known because they were friends with a celebrity for so long. Now they're doing work here, because they build up a following. And you know, so it's become this space of just like a circling drain, or how people perceive that it's a certain drain. And so that's why a lot of others will start to now use different labels, even if the patterns may still be similar. About just been the general nature of the work.

BLK IRL 26:04

You've hinted at this or not hinted but you said to straight up the gender aspect of it. There are a lot of influences are women and there seems to be like a line that you don't hate, at least I haven't observed as many men referring to themselves as influencers, but they are more likely to be the ones that assume those other titles, but women will take on the title, a more readily of influences in a man will do. Is that something you've noticed?

SHAMIRA IBRAHIM 26:27

Yeah, yeah, it's definitely I've noticed, and there are many influencers that do a variety of things, right. Especially in the fitness world, there are plenty of male influencers in the fitness world that will tell you all sorts of protein shakes and protein powders and do all sorts of crazy routines and promote things that are unhealthy as well, right and don't get called out for nearly as much in the way that women are in the fitness world. Like, that's one blatant discrepancy that doesn't get talked about as much. And even in the beauty world, right? There are, you know, male and female that actually get compensated at higher rates of lack of time than women in the beauty world. But yeah, you're right, that they don't get talked about as much. And they don't get highlighted as much or denigrated as much. Because it's kind of assumed to be kind of a woman's face, right? Or, you know, a woman's face or kind of just being the entertainer, right? Or the personality, or it's, it's kind of viewed as this hobby of homemaking, right, or lifestyle blogging. And because of that assumption, people don't necessarily associate an immense amount of space to it. But there are plenty of men who are involved in it. I mean, if



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you think about it, at the end of the day, it's just marketing. But marketing is viewed overwhelmingly as a limited space as an industry, right. And there are plenty of men involved in marketing. I mean, usually, when you look at marketing, comms, the way that people view it is that the like, executive jobs are dominated by men. And then like the comms jobs are like the actual engagement and like the communication work is done by the woman. And that weird bifurcation has always been perceived that way. But it's not necessarily true. There are plenty of men involved in industry as well. And so looking at that, in that perspective, people tend to feel that it's a woman's industry, when it's just as much of a man's industry, it's just usually used in different terms, right, but you'll definitely see a man with 75 hashtags, right? Just like, like, it's the man's equivalent of party promotion, right? Most party promoters are what? So, um, you know, it's, it's, it's just a similar,

BLK IRL 28:32

there are a lot of connections to the club scene. And like you said earlier, that is, that is a good example, I do want to pivot now to talk a little bit more about your work outside of Raleigh, in some of the other publications you've been for, because you've been everywhere, even for I'm just gonna name a few New York Times, Ebony, Fader, Teen Vogue, BuzzFeed, just a few, you know, publications that say America has written for the cup. What are some of the themes as a writer and a reader that you'd like to see more coverage on when it comes to internet culture? What's missing from the conversation?

SHAMIRA IBRAHIM 29:06

I think what's missing from the conversation is Black people. I mean, to be short, right? I give everybody keep it in a sentence. But really, it's that, you know, there's a lot of culture and tech writing happening, right. And now, there's a lot of tech reporting that's happening, that doesn't necessarily have as many Black culture writers kind of covering it. And I'm not the only person who's capable of doing it, there are so many other writers that are capable of doing it. But it's really that this space is kind of coalescing on top of each other, right? You know, there are spaces now in academia that are exploring it that are bleeding out into writing. And so we need to really be able to not parse out publicly and it's not just about talking about it with what's happening in tech talk but moving it through in so many other conversations because it really affects our day to day lives. Right. And when we talk about how this affects that's our discussion that affects the products that people are creating, right? So there's this whole space of like AI discussions or like AI computation very, where the sort of creative, you know, a discipline called, you know, basically decolonization theory and AI computation or post colonialization theory and AI computation. And that, you know, part of discussion is like, actual



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academic discipline, because you actually have to think about how you make your formulate computations and your logical theories. And think of it and remove yourself from like, classical assumptions that are very colonial in nature, and basically race based in nature. Right. And that is a form of discipline that is growing out of discussions that are happening in a public sphere, right? There are annual conferences about recent intellectual property, right, that actually that conference happens every year. And why you and it talks about recent IP and how AI affects decisions coming down to bail bonds, and actual, you know, deferment from and determined from black people going into jail, right, because if you start and stop the bail bond program, but start to do risk assessment programs, but we have faulty data for algorithms for risk assessment programs, we're not going to be stopping incarceration in any sort of way, shape or form, because the historical data of everybody who's been incarcerated is still all black people. So the risk assessment is still going to be black people as risks, right? We're not actually going to be dismantling anything, because the culture of America still builds upon black people being inherently violent. So talking about how all these things affect all parts of our society. Those are things that need to be kind of teased together and thrown through and have really robust conversations with a lot of nuance and tenacity that have been had, I've seen great writing about it. But I think we need to have a more robust, thorough, long form matters, right? These are not conversation that I think can be easily had 1500 words or less, I've had them. And I'm going to say that a lot of the pieces that people see that are full info, my best pieces, my editors, and I have worked in my editors, I love them to death for helping me bring out the best versions of these, this started out at 3000 words, because, you know, trying to cover especially difficult topics, you know, you want to explain everything, and it like explaining racism is at the core of everything. And then on top of it, you know, you end up writing a missive and then bringing it back down. And so really trying to be able to have those robust conversations about technology and surveillance and how this is really going to be played out in so many parts of popular culture, how are we going to rethink digital engagement? And now that we're all in quarantine, how do we rethink digital interaction or digital monetization? You know, even with the music industry, now that we think about just the idea of getting access to people, you know, all of that matters in a way that needs to be written about really sensitively, because how do you value what somebody is worth digitally? You know, it's like, well, I'm sitting on my house, I'm willing to pay \$10 to watch to Tinashe perform, but I'm not going to pay \$50 to watch Beyonce perform. I don't know, I'm just throwing out a number, right. But these are the conversations that we discuss, and we should be discussing, right. And having those conversations and even having discussions about data and what data gets sold and surveilled and how we, you know, what compromises we make as we accepted those, this the logic behind what we've already forfeited, because we forfeited a loss to the government and public



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data, versus what we should be fighting to protect, as black people who have already given so much over this country, right, those connections like you should be having, making those connections and talking about them. But it's, you know, that's a longer project that requires time and resources. And frankly, we deserve to be given those time your resources to have that dialogue and make that project

BLK IRL 33:57

and one of the more recent articles you wrote speaks just exactly what you were talking about when it comes to the music industry. So I wanted to see if you can expand on that a bit. But you wrote about female rappers and sexual agency for Teen Vogue recently. You were highlight in women like Flo Milli, Megan Thee Stallion and Saweetie. What do you think these artists can teach us about content creation in a digital age?

SHAMIRA IBRAHIM 34:18

I think what's been great about what those artists have done recently is, you know, like I said in the piece, it's not a new thing, that woman rappers have talked about sex and their agency and subverted you know, being on this sexual pedestal and decided, well, if we're going to use sexual politics as currency and rap at least I'm going to talk about my pleasure and central myself in it but what's been really pleasing to see in the last couple of years is that they've done it on their own terms the sense that if you social media, they've come up outside of just like the cornerstone of labels right? Not that we will not help them with a promotion and everything like that. But you know, men came on through SoundCloud, right, you know, a lot A lot of people you heard two mixtapes before fever, right? A lot of these rappers, Flo Milli just turned 20. Right, which blows my mind. Right. But you know, a lot of these young rapper girls are coming up without the requirement of a man's cosign. I think that is a really big deal. Cardi on her own came up on Instagram, right? And I think watching how they have subverted the like previously assumed construct of you need to come up with a set, you need to come up with a man's cosign. You need to come up as this is the first lady of this crew. This is the first lady of this label. And oh, by the way, she wants to talk about how she likes to fuck, right, like, just even separating themselves from that and saying, I'm going to talk about this independently and you can choose to engage or not is, you know, monumental in a, in a very specific way, because that did not happen for a while. Right? That was not a thing Lil Kim has to be with Junior mafia, right? Eve was with the Ruff Ryders, right? All of these artists had their own sets. Even Nicki right, she was with Young Money before that she was with Gucci, like all of these artists, were coming up with people collectively. Needed a man's cosign to be approved. Right? When Flo Milli came out who was cosigning her when, you know, her project that's getting the



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acclaim that it's getting, you know, came out, it was all other woman rappers, right. And so these things are the things that I'm paying attention to in 2020, which is that, yeah, the deconstruction of the patriarchy in hip-hop is a way down the road, right? But watching that we can amplify and pay attention to how other women are going out of their way to celebrate each other no matter how much we claim that, oh, women are catty, and there could only be one, and they go out of their way to be in each other. If you actually pay attention machinations, they actually do care for each other. And they actually do invest into this careers, and they actually are excited for each other. And that is what is fundamentally interested in worth investing in amplifying as people who want to care about engaging whatever culture that we think is worth preserving.

BLK IRL 37:05

And there, you know, there are so many issues to even like write about or think about when it comes to like technology and race. Like we touched on so many. But I mean, we can go deeper into any one of them. But I'm curious, as like, as a writer, and you're consuming the internet and you're engaged with so many issues, like how do you determine whether or not a trend is striking enough to like, dedicate a whole article to it or even pitch an article about it?

SHAMIRA IBRAHIM 37:28

Yeah, I write a lot of things down. And then I kind of just sit with them, and I see if I need to revisit them. So I usually am never pushing something instantaneously. I'm jotting down so many ideas constantly. And I use a lot of like, and this is part of like my, I guess, tech background. But honestly, anybody can use any of these tools. Like I use a lot of work management or project management apps. So if people use like Trello, or ask like that, I use notion. It's just a great app for task management. And so I do a lot of just keeping track of things, you know, and looking at all my ideas of the iPhone. No, honestly, right. But um, yeah, but the idea is just have your scratchpad for just saying, you know, these are the things that I have in mind. And then Honestly, I usually end up revisiting it a bit later. There are some pieces that by the time it came out, like I honestly had some thinking about, like that piece about Megan Thee Stallion and everything. Actually, I started thinking about it. And I started working on it with Teen Vogue around the time that Sugar dropped, right? Because if people had remembered, which is why I was actually not necessarily surprised by the backlash, but the intensity of it had, like thrown me a little bit for a couple of reasons. One was, it's not even like the worst song you ever heard growing up, like so that part I was like. So that part just had kind of blown my mind a little bit right. But two, you know, in Sugar like, which is how I started thinking about it. In that mixtape EP, she had dropped a song called Captain Hook, which is



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literally about a curved dick like. So that was where we have started it. And that's why we started the conversation. Because that happened and the Savage remix was, you know, headed for number one. And so it was like this is Yeah, this is a great year for Black women just watching everyone celebrating because at the time it was, that was headed for number one and the "Say So" remix had just gotten number one, right. So it's like, watching all these machinations happen, and we kept just reshaping the piece and thinking it through. And then obviously, you know, um, you know what happened. And so that was a trajectory, that piece that means that it happened over the course of a couple of months, just to give you a sense of how some of these pieces can have a lifecycle of some time. That's not all the time. Sometimes they turn out a piece in a week, right? But I can have an idea sit on it and either write it out and abandon it or sit on the idea. We can start thinking about it and then like come back to it a couple months later. So okay, it's worth coming to you now, right? So both approaches can happen. Sometimes you realize it's just not the right time to pitch something or something right time to you know, Write it or, you know, you just revisit it later. So, sometimes you want to pay attention to trends and not necessarily always want to have the first person to have discourse on something. It's not always worth it to be first. so worth it to have the first idea.

BLK IRL 40:14

Say it louder for the people on Twitter.

SHAMIRA IBRAHIM 40:18

You know, believe me, I always have an immediate opinion or a hot take on something. But I've had to learn sometimes just to hold my tongue and just see how things play out.

BLK IRL 40:30

I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Shamira. I want to now share three key takeaways that stood out to me. For every episode, I will include citations to the reference materials I mentioned, as well as some additional background reading for you on the Black in Real Life website. Visit www.blkirl.com to nerd out. Takeaway number one, the exploitation of Black people and Black creative labor are essential to the inner workings of internet culture. Internet culture is a reflection of Western culture, and like Western culture, internet culture has a long history of exploiting Black people Shamira points out early in our conversation, then nothing on the internet is free because we as an internet users are the products that are being sold on the internet. In his book distributed blackness, African American cyber cultures. Media Studies scholar Andre Brock explains how Black people have made the internet a Black space, whose contours have become visible through sociality and distributed digital practice, while also



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decentering whiteness as the default internet identity. He calls these Black digital practices. Black cyber culture block makes a distinction between black cyber culture and black culture online that I think is important to highlight here. He explains that research on black culture online examines Black Arts, literature, multimedia phenomenon, artifacts and audiences. Whereas research on Black cyber culture interrogate an ontological perspective of what blackness means for technologies and occasionally, design. An understanding of Black cyber culture is important in any examination of internet culture. As Shamira notes, there cannot be net neutrality or impartiality on the internet, because it's all built on biases and these biases have historically been and continue to be anti-black. Scholars like Lisa Nakamura and Safiya Noble, have published pioneering examinations of the racial politics and digital media that paid special attention to issues of algorithmic bias. In her book, cyber types, race, ethnicity and identity on the internet. Cultural Studies scholar Lisa Nakamura criticizes the notion that the internet is a racist utopia and demonstrates how the online world reproduces racial identity constructed offline. Websites with interface design elements like pulldown menus that lists people by racial and ethnic identities are an example of this. In her book, algorithms of oppression how search engines reinforce racism Information Studies scholar Safiya Noble challenges the dominant narrative that technology is mutual through her term, technological redlining, which describes the way that data is used to profile us by upholding the biases of the software engineers and leaders in Silicon Valley who are primarily white and Asian men, but mostly white men. These algorithms developed by these men leads to further oppression and marginalization both online and offline for women of color in particular after wall as Noble explains, computer language is a language and language is subjective. takeaway number two, influencing as an evolution of the cult of personality Shamira defines influencers as people whose personalities are packaged and monetized. This is just one of the many descriptions of influencing that we will discuss this season. In our conversation. Shamira describes influencer marketing as an industry that takes the idea of the cult of personality to the ultimate extreme This stood out to me because the phrase "cult of personality" personality gets used in public discourse. Often, if you do a Google search, you may notice that some of the more recent articles they use the phrase, cult of personality use it in reference to controversial public figures like Donald Trump and Elon Musk has also been used to condemn the leaders of actual cults like Nexium, the multi-level marketing company slash secret society slash sex cult, social scientists trace the concept of a cult of personality back to max Weber's concept of charismatic authority. The concept of charisma has become one of Weber's most notable contributions to social theory. Weber uses the term to characterize self-appointed leaders and politicians that are followed by people in distress, who believe the leader to be extraordinarily qualified, huh, sounds like someone I'd like to get out of office. When an individual possesses a charismatic



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authority they are perceived to hold a God given power. Although influences may arguably serve as representations of new cults of personality. Unlike the charismatic political leaders that Weber's studied any power to influence us as social actors may possess, it's not necessarily innate or God-given instead, to be an influencer means to perform a collection of everyday practices to become labeled an influencer. In other words, influencers are not born, they are created. We'll dive deeper into this point in future episodes. Takeaway number three. 2020 is setting the ground for the deconstruction of the patriarchy in hip hop. As a culture writer, Shamira has been paying attention to the ways that female rappers like Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are subverting the music industry's patriarchal assumptions about gender by centering their own pleasure in their lyrics. It used to be that women needed to cosign of a man to make it big as a rapper. Shamira cites Lil Kim's association with Junior Mafia, and Nicki Minaj's association with Young Money as examples of this trend. What stands out to Shamira about this newer class of female rappers is the way that they are using social media to put themselves on without the traditional steppingstones of a male cosigner, or even a record label contract in many cases. On top of that, they are countering the tropes of women being catty and competitive in the rap game by celebrating and supporting one another. This part of our conversation got me thinking about hip hop feminism. Hip Hop feminism is a term that the acclaimed writer Joan Morgan coined in her 1999 book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roast*. Hip Hop feminists are people who speak out against gender exploitation and hip hop. While these rappers may not necessarily think of themselves as feminist or refer to themselves as such as Shamira wrote in a recent article for *Teen Vogue*, the centering of erotic power through women going bar for bar with each other or standard out on their own far from eradicates the industry standard hip hop message that still runs rampant. But the allows for having a choice in your relationship with intimacy in hip hop, and power dynamics that is far more expansive than just to sis hat male's perspective, the discussion surrounding the sexual agency of today's female rappers are not too different from what has been said over the years about music video models or video vixens and a 2005 interview with five vixen, former video model and entrepreneur Melissa Ford shares and I quote, "I'm not the promiscuous trades I'm often mistaken for. I am a businesswoman who has used videos to launch a multimedia career my product is me." As Shamira remarks, our conversation, Cardi B essentially used Instagram to launch her own multimedia career sisters are still doing it for themselves. Whether it is 2005 or 2020, certain political pundits may fear the sexually liberated women depicted in the chart topping song and colorful video for Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's "WAP" or admonish it as the exploitation of women. But if you asked me, it would be preferable for these pundits to follow the advice of Twitter user at 843KT and worry about pandemics instead of Cardi and Megan's WAPs. You have just listened to a production of the Black in Real Life podcast hosted



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by Anuli Akanegbu, developed by Anuli Akanegbu, scripted by Anuli Akanegbu. Edited by Anuli Akanegbu. With research support by Anuli Akanegbu. The music was generously provided by Garth, whose single "Wild" can be streamed on anywhere you can find music. Thank you and remember, the people you follow online are also Black in real life.