

S2 E11: Our Black is Beautiful

(AJ II & Amarachi Nwosu)

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Intro Song: 'For The City'

0:46 AJ: Welcome to this special episode of *Max Out Time*, I'm your host, AJ II and we going global ya'll. On season one we went down to New Orleans, earlier in season two it was San Francisco but today we are leaving the US and headed to Japan. My guest is a Nigerian American filmmaker and artist straight from DC, who is letting the world know what it is like to be black in Tokyo. Amara Nwosu is the director and executive producer of the documentary sensation, *Black in Tokyo*, examining the lives of five melanated individuals living in Japan. Amara is setting the stage for an illustrious career in film with her viral hit and even though Japan is 14 hours ahead, we are blessed to have her with us on the phone today. Amara, how you been?

1:26 Amara: Hey Arthur, thank you so much for having me, I'm doing good.

1:30 AJ: Hey, thank you so much for being on today. I know it is early there and we're going to try and get you out of the way here. But, we wanted you on *Max Out Time* because we think your story and everything that you are doing in the film industry is outstanding. But first just bring the people and the audience in with a little bit about yourself, you know, a bio that you could tell everyone.

1:53 Amara: So my name is Amarachi Nwosu, I'm a visual artist, content creator and writer, I work mainly in the medium of photography and film. Um and I love just documenting different people, different cultures, different aesthetics so I love things that revolve around music and fashion and I love to bring my content all around that. I've been blessed to work in different places around the world from LA to London to Lagos to Tokyo and have been able to directly see, you know, the beauty that the world has in its different facets and I am excited to talk about it today.

2:34 AJ: So the beauty that you document is through film. How did you get into filmmaking? It says that you're a self-taught filmmaker and photographer. What sparked that interest and how did you teach yourself all these tools?

2:46 Amara: I think what really sparked it was just not seeing enough content that I could relate with and I thought that represented me. And I, you know, felt a certain way. At a certain point I got tired of complaining about the lack of representation I saw and decided to fill the gaps that I wanted to see filled, which required me to be behind the scenes. Getting

into film, at first, it was kind of difficult because film is one of those things that's definitely a team effort and it requires people coming together. So learning how to do everything on my own, from being the DOP to being the editor to being the director to being the producer, really allowed me to see all the different roles and the importance of playing each one of them well. So, ultimately, like I had said before, I really wanted to fill gaps and to create the representation I didn't see enough of growing up. So that, you know, young girls, young boys who look like me can grow up seeing different complex identities rather than the one dimensional identities that we often see in mainstream media. Which you know now is slowly changing but I think it requires more of a diverse group of people behind the scenes to really see diverse characters in front of the scenes.

4:10 AJ: So what specifically are you looking for? What specifically are you aiming for to get across? In terms of you're saying you're not seeing people that look like you, what do you want to showcase?

4:21 Amara: I mean, it's not necessarily not seeing people look like me. You can have somebody who looks like me but most of the time when I see narratives of black women for example, it can be very one dimensional. I think... when I say that...I mean, it reproduces the stereotypes that we often hear. And I think I kind of got tired of seeing a black woman just seen as whether an angry black women or as a side chick or as someone that did not have a protagonist narrative. So I wanted to put myself in a position to create a unique story for my own life so that I can really translate that.

5:08 AJ: So are you putting black women-i'm sorry-in leading roles, is that what you're doing?

5:15 Amara: What I am saying is basically, I saw the importance of creating complex characters and it's not just in black women, it's characters of all background ultimately and that's what I want to do with Melanin Unscripted. Melanin Unscripted is a platform that I launched my film *Black in Tokyo* with and *Black in Tokyo* is the first of many projects to come out this year and it's not just about black people, it's also showing complexities of identity and showing stories that are not necessarily told. I have this short documentary following a white rapper who is having a unique experience being in a space that is predominated by people of colour and black people and what his experience is like and what the experience is like talking about race relations and relating to those subjects. Even if they haven't directly affected him growing up and really just touching on different topics, different people and different identities. It's not like i said just about black women but showing identities and its

complexities so that's really what I want to do in general and that's really my mission in creating content.

6:38 AJ: It's not it's not just about black women but when did this idea of race relations crossover and into a global mindset for you? Because, of course you started here in New York and DC with your filmmaking and photography but I mean now you're in Tokyo. You're full-time in Tokyo and you've been all over the world. When did that crossover mindset start for you?

7:04 Amara: It's kind of always been within me, in the sense that like I'm Nigerian-American and my mom grew up in London and my dad grew up in Nigeria and then moved to America to go to college here. I think growing up, I've always been exposed to families that were in different parts of the world. That was my first exposure to complex identities because I thought that I definitely felt growing up that blackness within America was only shown in one light. I realized at a young age that blackness isn't one dimensional. Blackness is not just African-American, blackness is not just African; it's Afro-Caribbean, it's Afro-Latina. That's when I started to see that a lot of people aren't exposed to this because a lot of people don't leave their comfort zones. So, how can I create something that allows people to travel through my work?

8:08 AJ: I think your work is excellent and I understand exactly where you coming from and why you want to push these racial relations and the color grid so much but why Tokyo? When did that come about? Where did this 'culture flavor' come into your repertoire?

8:29: So I basically came to Tokyo first to studying abroad, for my school I went to Temple University in Philadelphia and luckily Temple had a campus in Japan. So, it was a pretty easy process to actually come to Japan through my school. What started out only to be a semester abroad ended up being a whole academic year. I even ended up changing my major from public relations to international communications just to be able to stay there which I think ended up suiting my ultimate goal better than public relations. I think Japan has always inspired me and some of the people that I've really been inspired by in the past; whether I think about Kanye West and whether I think of Pharrell, these are all artists and creators that had a big influence on me growing up. Also, people that have been influenced by Japanese culture and then later on, I started to get into Japanese artists, like Nujabes was a musician and composer that actually composed one of my favourite animes which is *Samurai Champloo*. You know I think being exposed to the content that was created, whether I think of Teriyaki boys and whether I think about designers like Nigo and Bape. I think that was the first exposure to the creative scene and my brother had studied in Beijing

for a year in China. I thought, hey, if he can go to Asia and flourish and learn so much and grow and meet amazing people. Like, why can't I go to Japan and not just grow as an individual outside of my comfort zone but be exposed to the aesthetics and the artistic and urban culture scene that has shaped some of my favorite creators? I think from there, it was just about exploring and learning about myself and then I just felt an urge in me to document and really to tell story. Because I felt like coming to Japan...when I was doing my research on what the experience would be like... I had limited content to explore and nothing that was really visually stimulating. So part of my reason of coming was to create, and learn and grow and to meet really dope people.

11:11 AJ: So how did you meet these dope people? I mean, is there twenty or thirty of ya'll in Tokyo basically in the same subset? Because I really like the narrative you were playing; with the Eritrean girl and then you had my man from Africa and the couple who were from here and the guy who really liked anime as well. So you really touched on five very different and unique individuals to play on this narrative of being black and what it means to be black in Tokyo. But really, how did you find them, networking-wise, what did you do?

11:45 Amara: As far as connecting with people, two of the people that were in it, were from my school; they went to Temple Japan. Two other people, my home girl, Trice, actually connected with her through Instagram before I came to Tokyo [AJ: *Knew it had to be IG in some way*] Lee, who is from Ghana which is in West Africa. I connected with him through one of the people that produced the project. They actually got their haircut [Lee is a hairstylist] and so did Antarius who went to school with me, got his hair done there. So it's kind of just the network all connected, with Emel being from East Africa, Eritrea specifically. She was able to give me a unique perspective and talk about her experiences of not just about being a black woman, but being an African woman in a space where many people assume she's American and what that experience was like. That's something that I was able to connect with her in general so it made sense to have her on the project. With Antarius, we were able to connect on a lot things when it came to culture and music and fashion. Even today, he is one of my closest friends out here and so it just made sense to have him involved in the project. Things really just came naturally with Will and Trice, you know they're a military couple. They're a unique military couple because they really embedded themselves within Tokyo's fashion/culture. They had a unique interest in a lot of things where people on base weren't and I just love that about them. I could relate with them so well and talk to them about so many different subjects and it made sense to have them involved. With Lee, he really brought a unique perspective because he had been in Tokyo

since 1992 and you know he really just has been able to see the culture grow and was able to create a community within the culture.

13:56 AJ: You had five very compelling, unique individuals there and they all were across a wide spectrum which I love about the piece. But you as a Nigerian-American and not only as an American but as a Nigerian-American what has been like the adjustment for you specifically?

14:15 Amara: As far as the adjustment, the thing with being an American with having American passport as well as a Nigerian passport. With being an American, Nigerian-American specifically, I think that obviously I have a privilege with the American passport and being able to travel and having a relatively easier visa process than somebody who has a Nigerian passport. That's a really big privilege and one thing I always talk about is passport privilege and the fact that a lot of people who are Nigerian don't have the ability to travel because the process is not as simple. That was a really important thing for me to touch on to see the experience of Lee who is from Ghana and the experience of Will and Trice who came through the military or Antarius and how they had a completely different adjustment and process just to get to Japan. Me specifically, I think I had an awareness about Japanese culture and my style for the most part was definitely Japanese inspired so fitting within the fashion scene wasn't super difficult and because I am Nigerian-American and because I have an exposure of different cultures and of different places around the world, it allowed me to maybe adjust to a different cultures easier because I have been in situations where I've been outside of my comfort zone and learnt to adapt to different circumstances. For someone who is, you know, American and never left America, that might have been a lot more difficult. I think being Nigerian-American has allowed me to flourish, learn and grow because I've already been in circumstances where I'm out of my comfort zone. I guess, growing up, I definitely felt that I wasn't always American enough or I wasn't always Nigerian enough and I always lived in this "in between" that I had to be comfortable with--

16:18 AJ: You had this adjustment process in America and also in Japan?

16:21 Amara: I definitely think I had an adjustment in America. Although I was born in America, I lived the first three years of my life in Nigeria. When I moved to America, I still had a Nigerian accent for the most part because of kind of growing up there for the early stages of my life. Ten or fifteen years ago being African in America wasn't quote on quote "cool" because I got comments mainly i'm going to be honest from African Americans, [Comments like] "African booty scratcher" talking about Africa in a context of a place where there isn't

people flourishing, even though I've been exposed to African excellence my whole life. And saw people who work really hard and overcome many obstacles.

17:18 AJ: Yeah, kids are mean, especially teens. I remember growing up, and hearing the African name calling and everything. Mainly, it's about this colorism issue we have in America, if you don't look like someone that is your race, you seem to start to demean them in certain ways. If you think someone is not necessarily "black" quote on quote, you demean them. I know that kids and people can be mean in general. In terms of adjusting artistically out in Tokyo, what about the pop culture there? The music, the films? How do you watch movies there? You're a director there, are you fluent in the language? How do you watch? With subtitles?

18:07 Amara: I am learning Japanese which is not an easy language and it's definitely something that takes time. Even Japanese people who have lived here their whole life don't know Kanji characters which is like their third alphabet basically. And it it definitely takes time, I think as far as music and culture goes I think, we're living in this age where music and culture is definitely global and we're so interconnected that I go to a club here and most of the music they are playing is like international music. I go to concerts and I've seen different artists like people like Stormzy from London have come has represented, Khalela has come, the Internet. um Travis Scott has come, MadeinTYO have come so I think hip hop -

19:02 AJ: I've seen Gogo being played on Twitter and going viral, is that in Japan too?

19:08 Amara: Um i'm not sure about Gogo being viral in Japan or people being exposed to Gogo. Maybe people are exposed to the sound but don't know history and the origins so Goldlink has been out here and Goldlink may have some influence growing up in the DMV or maybe they have listened to Wale. I don't think people have been thoroughly educated on Gogo's history because it's so rich.

19:35 AJ: You right about that, I had a podcast episode earlier on in this season with Darius, Devin's brother and we had a whole segment on Gogo music and the influences in the city and how Gogo is almost dead. Unless you listen to some Goldlink or the radio every once in a while, we were talking about how we can revitalize Gogo and everything. Do you think the music and fashion internationally, you talked about Tokyo, it's the same almost. Do see any cultural appropriation there?

20:11 Amara: Do I see cultural appropriation within Japan?

20:15 AJ: Yes

20:17 Amara: I mean I think cultural appropriation exists everywhere and cultural appropriation is something that exists amongst all people of all backgrounds. Once again we're in this interconnected world, I think where cultural appropriation becomes dangerous is when people don't understand the history behind what they are consuming or what they're producing and when people really don't give credit where it's due. They don't give credit to the source and they don't try and understand. I think definitely there are some Japanese kids who just listen to Hip Hop and get their hair dreaded and think that they can embody hip hop culture but don't understand the context of hip hop, or the context of race relations within hip hop, or the influence of racial discrimination and racism ultimately on the hip hop culture and the root and the start of hip hop. I think hip hop in this day and age has changed a lot. To be honest we do have a lot of conscious rappers, we have Kendrick and J Cole and people like that who make an effort to make sure people understand where they coming from and the importance of their identity in context of the art that they are creating. A lot of hip hop these days is really surface-level and doesn't give young Japanese people the opportunity to fully understand where things are coming from because I feel like some of the artists themselves do not make an effort. I think there's a responsibility to educate people but also a responsibility on people to educate themselves.

22:04 AJ: You're talking a lot about education, are your films educating the Japanese out there also?

22:13 Amara: I think that right now *Black in Tokyo* is like my first main project and *Black in Tokyo* is the start of something much bigger and something that will give people the opportunity to learn more about black culture. I think that *Black in Tokyo* really just opens the door to people understanding the black experience, specifically in Japan. Which a lot of the issues which they talked about in the context of media representation and things of that nature are issues that aren't just an issue in Japan, there are issues still America but it's an issue in Europe and even in Africa. Where a lot of the time, women are billboards are light skinned which fuels the bleaching epidemic there so I think that [*Black in Tokyo*] opens a window for Japanese people to learn but even in that context, everybody in the film is speaking English. So it's like it also may hit only a specific demographic of Japanese people. I think that I want my film to educate people on different experiences in general. Not just Japanese people, but ultimately people all around the world.

22:32 AJ: Well, you got almost 500 000 views on YouTube and that's something noteworthy and you should have a pat on the back for. The Oscars are coming up in terms of awards season. Is that one of your goals one day? To be a female director who wins best picture or

best director Oscar?

23:53 Amara: I definitely see myself winning awards, making history and just being a part of shaping change and inspiring people to really pursue their dreams and be passionate about what they're doing. I one hundred percent see that, I see myself directing a feature documentary one day. I see myself directing a feature film one day. I'm definitely going to get into directing music videos. I one hundred percent see myself being in being that space and winning those awards whether it be an Oscar or an Emmy or a Tribeca film festival award or anything in that context. Hopefully, sooner than later one of my first goals is to definitely do something with Netflix and kind of find a way to not just to connect Melanin Unscripted as platform but also Melanin Unscripted as a production company, as a creative agency and a media house that creates content to be distributed to different spaces.

25:14 AJ: You mentioned Netflix, what's on your playlist right now? Do you take from other things that you watch and production or directors that you see right now?

25:23 Amara: As far as what's on my playlist, on Netflix, I've been watching things like *Black Mirror*. Which I think is a really unique show because every episode has a different theme that really educates people on what are the potential risk on technology. I think it opens up the issues that exists in our world and makes us think in different ways about it. It shows us different layers about it so I'm really loving *Black Mirror*. A film that came out recently that I enjoyed as far as movies go was *Get Out* because it talked about race relations in a unique way that was funny but at the same time also in a way a little bit scary but really brought different emotions out in a way that was never really done before. As far as like TV shows and movies, that's some of my favourites right now.

26:30 AJ: Is *Get Out* going to win best picture?

26:35 Amara: Oh, one hundred percent, *Get Out* needs to win every award that it's nominated for.

26:41 AJ: The 'Sunken Place' alone needs to win Best Picture that scene that there alone just does it for me.

26:26 Amara: It was incredible. It was just so good, I left that movie theatre just feeling so inspired and feeling like this is the start of a new era.

26:57 AJ: Shout out Jordan Peele on that!

26:59 Amara: I'm really excited for *Black Panther* as well.

27:01 AJ: Oh yeah, we still got two weeks away for that, but *Black Panther*, I'll be lined up, you know, maybe be go to Majestic or something you know. But *Melanin Unscripted*, just tell us one more time what your company is going to embody and how you see yourself in the next five/ten years with that. Are you about to give Netflix a run for its money, like honestly?

27:25 Amara: I mean, it could be that way. I definitely think that it could be a streaming platform of original content. As far as Netflix goes it could even be thing where *Melanin Unscripted* could also collaborate with Netflix and find ways to do it together. I think once again, *Melanin Unscripted* is a platform that really is meant to explore complex identities and cultures around the world to ultimately blur the lines. Right now, we're busy on visual content and creation and at the same time, I have a podcast series coming up and I've been blessed to interview people like Chi Modu who is one of my mentors and a legendary photographer who has a whole book on Tupac and have documented Nas at 17 in his bedroom in Queensbridge. So talking about the experience of being a visual content creator and how to maintain longevity over decades. I talked with Ebonee Davis who's an activist and model. I talked with my friend, who really is embodying a nomadic lifestyle and his experience of being a content creator. So it's just also about giving information to artists and creatives all around the world so that they can also embody that themselves. When I say "blur the lines", I think the whole concept behind *Melanin Unscripted* is the idea that growing up we are often given a script for our colour and our background which doesn't always show the true depth of our identity and really *Melanin Unscripted* is about being unscripted and creating your own script. So I just want to give a platform for people who are creating their own lane, creating their own script and really influencing and shaping the next generation.

29:19 AJ: That's beautiful that you can create your own lane. You letting young people go out there and be creative in their own mind set and be creative in who they are. You're giving them a platform and you're on to big, huge things. Everyone knows you already are with the *Huffington Post* and all the radio interviews and all the interviews you are doing and all the publicity that you are getting is very well deserved. But, I'm going to step out of your realm for one second. I want to ask you; if you were just born again, completely started life over and you had to pick a new profession and had nothing to do with art or fashion or design or any type of film making, if you just started over; what would your profession be?

30:01 Amara: Um I would say this is something that I'm still interested in doing potentially because I don't want to be boxed in. I would definitely say that I want to start a non-profit and ultimately start school for people who are involved in countries who don't necessarily have the exposure to travel and go out of their comfort zones, and really bring information to them and really bring resources to them and really help build their communities. I've always known that what I want to do is help people and I think that any way I can do that is by non-profit. Also in a way I would also be a politician or somebody that is directly impacting people and creating legislation behind things that ultimately shape people's lives and perspectives.

31:04 AJ: Well, for the politician, CEO, President of the school board whatever you want to do, I want to thank you again, my special guest, the executive producer of *Black in Tokyo* and the founder of *Melanin Unscripted*, Amara Nwosu, do you have anything to leave us with?

31:21 Amara: You know I just want to thank you for allowing me to further express myself and spread my message for you all for creating a unique platform. For any message that I want to send to young people or to people in general, just to go out of your comfort zone and see what the possibilities are outside of that. Nothing grows in a comfort zone and you're not really going to see what you're capable of until you are willing to do something that was never done so *to get results you, you have to do something you never have*. I just want to leave a message for people to be the best version of yourself and grow not just in your comfort zone but out of your comfort zone. So once again, thank you so much Arthur for allowing me to tell my story and for the *Melanin Unscripted* message I know that you're going to continue to do amazing things, and bring people on your platform that will tell unique stories and allow people to grow through the process.

32:36 AJ: Thank you, that's the goal that is the main goal and for you, keep defining and exploring and achieving the unexpected because nobody expected this to happen but you are defying the odds at all costs. Thank you so much again Amara. Please continue to subscribe to Max Time II on iTunes and Soundcloud, add my guest, @amaraworldwide on social media for more updates. Like on Facebook, follow on IG and Twitter for Amara Nwosu. I'm AJ and I'm out!

32: Outro: 'For The City'

32:57 –End–

[Max Out Time W/ AJ II](#)