

# Can we talk about race and advertising?

By [Nas Hoosen](#)

15 May 2017

What's it like as a person of colour working in the ad industry?

It's the constant conflict of working for a place that's responsible not only for your income, but often the proliferation of damaging stereotypes about your race.

Everyone wants to change for the better. That's the first lie I tell myself every day. It's the first of many things I tell myself to believe that what I do matters, that it has meaning, that I should keep going. The world we live in is a collection of stories we tell ourselves. And we learn these stories from one another, from art, from movies, from music and yes, from advertising. And because it's advertising that I get to make most of the time, it's the lies I tell in advertising that I'm most concerned with daily.

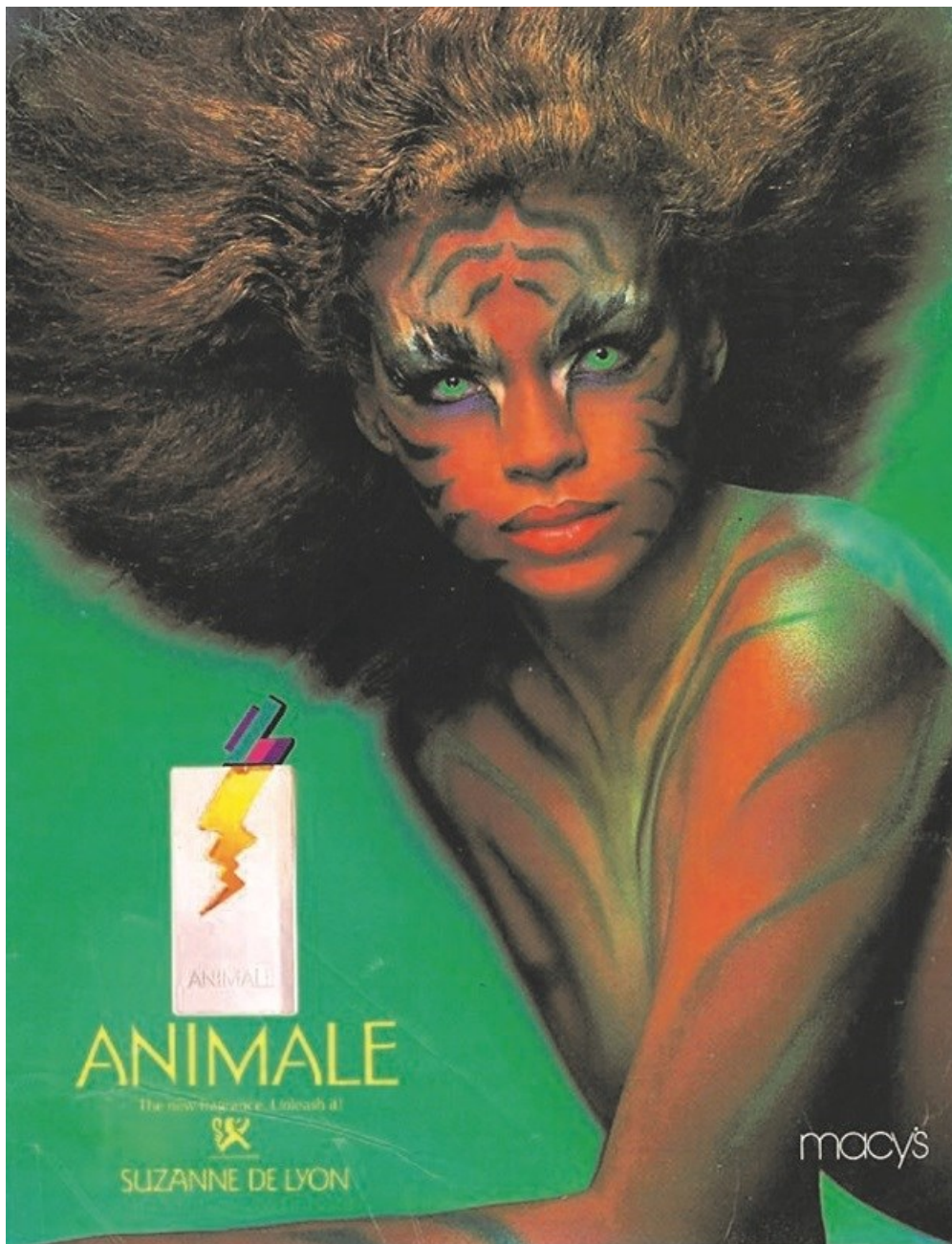


Happy to clean? The trope of black people dancing when they're happy is one of the most used stereotypes in advertising, such as in this ad for Sunlight Liquid.

A brief arrives on my desk from the client, a Brand.

My art director and I need to sell The Product, and we need a smart, creative way to do it.

We've got 45, maybe 30 seconds to communicate to an audience who have grown up with ads invading their lives and so want to listen to the Brand about as much as they do their own parents.



Noble savage? The idea of black women as wild, exotic animals is another stereotype.

There are a few things we could do now to be effective at our jobs. We can do research and talk to the people around us. We can think about the Brand and what it stands for. We can consider what we know about people, and all the things we don't know about people, and construct an insight from that. Then we can build that insight into an idea, and that idea into a creative execution.



Alternatively, there are the stereotypes we could lean on instantly. The other ads that the client, our colleagues and the audience have all seen hundreds of times over. The lies that shape our shared understanding of the world.

There's the mechanically racially balanced cast of black, white and brown families sharing meals at a restaurant themed around appropriation of a First Nations American culture. What traditional ad men refer to as "cappuccino"-skinned women, showing off clothing and make-up, their hair replaced so any semblance of their blackness is whittled away. Or maybe it's been teased out into something that represents the exoticism and ferocity of some pseudo-Africa that colonisers feared and fetishised. We're making these commercials in Africa, but somehow, we're making them for Western eyes, begging our masters to take us back.



All for one: The idea of the multi-cultural friend group used to be a staple of rainbowist advertising.

These are the ideas that are more comforting to look at because they're familiar. It's like Joseph Goebbels said, "A lie told a thousand times becomes the truth", and everybody wants the truth, right?



The black story?

“As a person of colour, you can walk into a brainstorm with a real insight, with a real idea and how to translate it creatively, but seven times out of 10 it’s misunderstood,” says Neo Makongoza, a senior copywriter and my colleague at Native VML. “In 2017, where marketers are looking for The Black Story more and more, it’s imperative that you don’t isolate black people.”

**CASTLE LAGER** **THE RUGBY CHAMPIONSHIP**

**WORLD CLASS RUGBY  
WORLD CLASS FANS**

**THE PERFECT PLAY**

**1** SA dominates the scrum **2** SA makes a line break **3** SA scores a try

Buy a 500ml draught and get your Perfect Play scratch card.  
Collect all three Perfect Play scratch cards with two mates to enter the  
lucky draw to **WIN A CASTLE LAGER SUPERFAN HAMPER.**

**It all comes together with a CASTLE.**

**Not for Sale to Persons Under the Age of 18.**

Neo has worked in the industry for over a decade, for four different major agencies, and in that time he has never reported to a black creative director. His best experience in that time has been with our current creative director, a white man who understands that he isn’t the authority on identity in South Africa or anywhere else. When a brief comes in, Neo feels that he’s empowered to bring his unique perspective as a black man to his work.

“It’s glaringly and disgustingly obvious what the social stereotypes are about black people. And what we seem to enjoy is reflected [in commercials]. Verbatim. Without any emotional intelligence,” says Neo. “The people releasing those stereotypical commercials are drawing their ideas from a particular insight, but they are misinterpreting that insight.”

The idea that black people will dance for literally anything is one of the most consistently perpetrated stereotypes in South African advertising. Black janitors dance while mopping.

Black students dance while looking for spare change. And black flight attendants dance because they've had a long day at work and just need to cut loose. Maybe one of those would be fine.

But when you see it repeated again and again, it becomes a hypnotic sentiment: black people are just bodies shifting in the atmosphere to illustrate how okay we are despite how messed up the world is all around us.



Find black actors. Hit the music. Dance. You've got your advert!

Bogosi Motshegwa 5 Apr 2017



The white saviour: This Feed a Child advert, which showed a black child being fed like dog, caused an uproar.

Neo laughs when I suggest this. He goes straight for the jugular; the laundry detergent commercials where "black mamas" are so pumped that their laundry is done they break out into song and dance.

"The cultural insight is that black people love dancing," he says. "But I'm not gonna dance because I've hung my washing on the line. That's a chore. Black, white, Indian, whatever. Nobody dances to that."

And yet this is consistently how laundry is sold in South Africa. In commercials that tie into even older lies about black people being pleased by the act of labour. Like the maids, butlers or slaves of old minstrel shows, black mothers are presented as eager to do hard work. Even in the independent space of their own homes.



Safety dance: A black woman dances in an advert for Doom pesticide.

In the visual landscape of Ad Land, however, the realities of their independence don't need to be probed. She's so pumped because her whites are coming out whiter that nobody has to stop and ask how her blacks are doing.

## The real story

Neo pitches me the ideal version of that same ad. He switches to the voice of a character, a woman working late one evening to get her laundry done.

"My husband works tirelessly. Underpaid. Sometimes he doesn't know where our next meal is going to come from. But every day he goes out there, trying to work towards getting that income. And the thing that brings him the most pride is wearing his uniform clean. Fade out..." Neo stops for a moment. "Can you imagine the power of that story? If you wanna capture the emotional essence, capture the truth of that essence. She slaves on Sunday, washing with her hands, she loves that soap because washing with her hands is so hard, bra, but the soap helps."

Neo says that story comes from his reality. From his mother making him shine his shoes every Sunday night while she washed his school uniform by hand.

"That's the reality of that ad," he says. "It doesn't help to a point where I need to ululate about it. It helps in that I've done my washing so when my husband steps out again, there's a level of decency to him, and I can thank the brand for that."

But that's just a matter of representation in the hypothetical world of stories. The real issue is in the offices of agencies where people like Neo and me work every day, surrounded by our black peers. Native is probably the first agency either of us has worked at where we feel like our voices are heard and our identities are respected.

"[Black creatives] don't want to be seen as revolutionaries," he says. "For anyone who comes from a previously disadvantaged family, myself included, speaking out is not something you want to do when you're trying to feed your family." And yet Neo says he tries to raise the red flag as early as possible in every project he's on. "If you don't say something, there's perpetuation that's been around for so many years, it will just carry on. And it will get worse."

## **An unfamiliar narrative**

Both Neo and I have been in rooms before where our insights are overlooked because they aren't coming from a familiar place. What's lived-in for us can feel outlandish to the traditional world of advertising. That kind of thing doesn't always align with the designs of white colleagues. Our experiences can be easy for them to dismiss just because they're unfamiliar.

"I feel insulted. I feel like my point of view wasn't taken into consideration," says Neo of those situations. "And when it falls flat it doesn't become a matter of I-told-you-so. It becomes bigger than advertising. It becomes a failed society."

And that is prejudice in action. It's the assumption that the lies we've told are the reality we live in. When the reality is something else entirely. And we keep hoping that the world will change, but it won't unless we can change the stories we tell one another. Because all of us are used to telling lies to make it through the day. What's different is often just the reasons we tell them.

"Black parents are not trying to teach you the value of responsibility. They have nothing else to offer you except an education. And they hide behind the teachings of that value to make them feel better about their situation," says Neo. "If [black parents] told you the real truth about where they are economically and why they can't provide for you the things that would help you soar like your counterparts do, it would leave you in the same place they are. Bitter and feeling like the world has cheated you out of something."

"And the lies we have to tell in order to fit into this normalcy is called the advertising industry. No one wants to hang out with the deadbeat guy from Soweto who's struggled all his life, who is telling war stories, a victim of racial segregation, and now he's here because he fought the good fight." Neo sighs in a moment of self-reflection.

"Everyone wants to hang out with the guy who's able to go to Maboneng with them on a Saturday, and not talk about the struggle, and be comfortable enough to talk about the good times that prevail right now. Those are the kinds of people that our counterparts want us to become. And those are the types of people we do become because we want to succeed just like our counterparts did. So this financial need to bridge this gap lands us in a situation where we're letting ourselves go in order to accommodate our socioeconomic situation. And I can't blame anyone for that. We're compromising for our own livelihood."

## **Changing the narrative?**

We share a moment of silence when he says this. A moment of recognition not just for the industry we're in, but the world too. There's no doubt that there's a shift happening, that with more black creatives working in our industry, the dynamics of representation are changing. But they're not changing fast enough. There's been a noticeable shift in the way many brands advertise in South Africa – Neo and I have both had the chance to produce work with black people in front of the camera and black voices getting to fight for a change away from the rainbowism of our youth.

But it's not enough yet. For every piece of work where we're sharing real South African insights, there's something where all we're managing to do is get a black face in front of the camera, palette-swapping a global vision of whiteness with a black face. As long as we're being dictated to by global strategies, by global imagery and global agendas, as long as we're still trying to build an image of the future based on a lie from the past, South African advertising is going to be

compromised.

Advertising is often deplorable. It's every sell-out artist looking to cash in on capitalism's sweet dream to survive another day. But creating an advertising campaign is also an immensely collaborative experience. It involves copywriters, art directors, designers, strategists, human beings aligning for a moment to try to make something that will, sure, sell a product, but also, hopefully, carry a message. A message in a bottle that the future can understand.

Everybody wants to change for the better. That's the first lie I tell myself every day. It's the first of many things I need to tell myself in order to not just believe what I do, but to practise what I believe. That if we're going to live in a better world, we have to first believe that the pieces we'll need to build it exist in the here and now. If I'm trying to sell any lie, it's that one.

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