

On being a black face in a predominantly white space



By [Paballo Mlahlehi](#)

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Back when rose-tinted glasses were considered chic, I was thoroughly optimistic about working in the ad industry. This passion grew stronger in varsity, having caught a glamorised glimpse of life in that space.



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From the fast-paced nature of the ad beast, to the ad folk's inclination to excessive drinking (I'll find any excuse to drink, to be honest), while being able to significantly influence pop culture – it was clear that this world was where I belonged. Or so I thought.

Nothing could have prepared me for the disillusionment I'd be confronted with upon realising that the same industry I so badly wanted to be part of, was averse to the likes of what I represent. Being black, female, and disruptive to the status quo is almost always met with hostility. Being all three of these things poses a threat to the environment where white male patriarchy continues to thrive.



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Lack of transformation in the industry

I first realised this in 2013 as a painfully underpaid junior, and the only black copywriter at a digital agency I worked for. My very white and very condescending manager believed he could belittle me the way he did my other black colleagues. When his attempts proved futile (because I'd stand up to him), he resorted to making me look problematic to the rest of the

management team.

That was my first encounter with white male privilege, and it opened my eyes to the lack of transformation in the industry. These two issues disgusted me then as much as they do now; the only difference being that I'm more proactive about addressing these issues than I was back then.

Although having to (a) constantly contend with white fragility when you call out [microaggressions](#) (b) explain in detail, why it's irrational to expect me to represent the entire black community, (c) explain (again) why it's presumptuous for white people to believe they're well within their rights to consider themselves gatekeepers of black culture, and (d) prove over, and over again that I'm more than capable of doing my job (because brownies are always deemed incompetent until proven otherwise, obv) is triggering; I *have* to take up these spaces.

Never cease fighting

Being a black face in white spaces is exhausting, but I owe it to the black community to never cease fighting for us to be represented.

I do this because the experiences that constantly remind me of my blackness are not exclusive to me. I do this because of the budding black creatives who have dreams of taking up similar spaces and thriving, without being expected to apologise for the colour of their skin.

Having being consumed by whiteness for as long as I have has made me realise that while the industry's gatekeepers are always quick to "talk" about addressing its lack of transformation, especially on top-level management, they *do* nothing about it because they don't stand to lose anything from being complacent.

Representation is possible

It's up to us, brownies, to ensure that we're recognised. If Marvel's [Black Panther](#) taught me one thing, it's that representation *is* possible.



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And so, I'll keep fighting. I'll fight until I'm not the only black face in meetings. I'll fight until being black and in a senior role is the norm and not the faux achievement that it currently is. I'll fight until the concept of a token black ceases to exist. I'll keep on keeping on, until junior creatives are no longer used to improve a company's BBBEE score under the guise of learnership programmes. I will fight until there's no question that a black person can do the same job their white counterpart can do and do it exceptionally well.

I will fight until conversations around race aren't optional and until my blackness is fully accepted (not just the parts of me that make wypipo feel comfortable).

I will fight until there are more of us occupying previously 'slegs blankes' spaces.

ABOUT PABALLO MOLAHLEHI

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