

Masquerade

Beverly Chen

A creature of the Dark Continent. She lies, recumbent on the russet earth in the embrace of wild blooms. The moon's blaze casts a slender trace of light on its beloved beauty, illuminating the rich bronze of her skin. The beam gently grazes her sculptured face. She stares at the world through her almond eyes, with her head delicately tilted backwards and her full lips carefully sealed. She holds a secret. She holds *the* secret.

I am haunted by the vision of the woman placed before me. There is something strangely mystifying in her orchestrated pose that gestures to a faint but familiar thought: she is not the first. She is a figuration of blackness that serves as the embodiment of the Foreign—of the voluptuous and sensual, the fearsome and supernatural.

In the relationship between the appropriated and the appropriator, there lies an advertising brand of Africanism embedded in the ideology of the colonial era. It is a historical period flooded with Eurocentric beliefs that dictated the importance of the Western sphere to world culture. I see the creation of a comically exaggerated brand of African culture in many areas of advertising. Associations with Africa are caricatured in the Judel Pozo perfume advertisement. The woman has full, provocative lips, a bald head, slanted eyes, and holds a submissive posture. Other than the string of beads bound to her body, she is naked. She is a savage; or so she is in the illusory Western advertising universe. When I peer into her eyes I see the sorrow in plain view. She is devoid of a smile, or any semblance of joy. It strikes me that such an obvious discovery is often overlooked by the veiled gaze of the common spectator; a gaze belonging to the market. It is a gaze glossed over by the promise of glamour. The sadness

that she endures is ignored. Her plight is acknowledged as normal and adheres to the stereotype of African compliance. She is barbaric in the sacramental way that her continent is infantilized. As has been the West's view through previous centuries, the Western world held a paternal responsibility to correct Africa's perceived inferiority. It was their duty as a superior civilization to protect and educate the child-like African race.

The image alludes to a specific age of Western history. The colonial age was dominated by imperialistic rationales and the novelty of slavery. Cultural hegemony and dominance was anchored by notions of the exotic "other". Society was hypnotized by its own imaginings of a fantastical world of the unknown. Perhaps it still is. In this way, nostalgia is blatant in the advertisement, which points to the aforementioned era with the sight of half-revealed breasts and beads that resemble chains. The woman in the advertisement is exploited as a marketing strategy. She forms a distant ideal that manifests as the starring character in the market's imagination. She is deliberately transformed by the advertising industry into an almost-fantasy. I am deceived into believing that I will become her. I am led to believe that the purchase of the perfume will bring me a sudden quality of exoticism, causing others to look on in awe. But it won't.

She resides in an Edenic environment. She is encircled by wild flowers as a dove hovers above her. The delusions of the West and of advertising are clear to me now as I see how such a horrific sight is romanticized. The racist label "In Black" and the slave at the forefront of the image are idealized by the design of such an exotic atmosphere. We must recognize that we are being presented with nothing more than a fictitious stereotype that was created, and is perpetuated by our own imaginations; a stereotype created in response to a collective need to allay internal insecurities. She is the subject on whom we project our self-doubt, envy, and fears.

In constructing a stereotype lacking in truth, a polarity is created that forms a disparity between 'us' and 'them'. In some ways, 'they' personify that which we lack, and that which we envy. So, we choose to idealize and romanticize, and then buy the product of our delusions. In this way, the perfume in the advertisement is a culmination of our fantasies, and a demonstration of wealth. We are not only being sold perfume, but also a slave. The advertisement proposes that by purchasing the perfume, we are purchasing the status of wealth, an aspect key to cultural hegemony. The advertising campaign relies on the greed and envy of its potential customers. And envy, being a form of reassurance, is what we seek as we wish to be the subject of others' envy. But, what we are left with is still ourselves, masquerading as what we are not.