



Rent-a-Human

Satirical Web Site Addresses Racial Divide, But Not Welcomed by All

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This Web site is satire, but does it help bridge the racial divide or make it worse? (www.rent-a-negro.com/damali_ayo)

— Do you have a problem saying "rent-a-negro.com?" Don't worry, says damali ayo, the African-American artist who created the satirical Web site — the mock service is supposed to push buttons, even if they're her own.

"I have difficulty saying the name of the site on some days, to be perfectly honest," said ayo (who believes her name looks best in lowercase letters).

Based in Portland, Ore., where African-Americans make up less than 7 percent of the population, ayo, 31, says she set up rent-a-negro.com in April mostly as a response to a lifetime of insensitive — and frequently stupid — treatment, often at social functions.

Imagine, she says, curious strangers coming up to you and running their fingers through your braided locks without permission, or saying things like, "You must not have to brush your hair in the morning" or "How do you wash your hair?"

Ayo says she set up rent-a-negro.com to mock her own situation and to draw attention to such insensitivity.

"I had a particular group I was involved in where people loved to bring me to every social event. I saw it as a networking opportunity, but I wasn't getting what I needed," she said. "When I told my mother this, she told me, 'Yeah, well, you just can't be everyone's rent-a-negro.' And that just stayed in my head and emerged into a piece of artwork."

Viewed as a Commodity

On the site, ayo pretends to offer her services at parties and social functions for anyone who wants to know more about African-Americans or wants to appear hip and inclusive.

She does not tell online viewers outright about the satirical nature of the site, which is complete with various sales pitches, a tongue-in-cheek autobiography, mock customer comments, rental rates, and ordering and payment information. The site takes all major credit cards.

"For the past few years, I've been exploring race and race relations in the U.S. through my artwork," ayo said. "I was interested in exploring the sense of being commodified by the white members of a larger society, and I thought that e-commerce would be a really interesting mechanism of exploring that."

Rent-a-negro.com is reminiscent of another satire site that emerged last year, blackpeopleloveus.com. It features pictures of a white couple, "Sally and Johnny," laughing and joking around with African-Americans and celebrating their "understanding" of black culture.

On their home page, Sally and Johnny say, "We are well-liked by Black people so we're psyched (since lots of Black people don't like lots of White people)!"

Ayo remembers laughing at the site last year, forwarding it to her friends and keeping it in mind — and well as some rental car Web sites — when she created rent-a-negro.com. She has received hundreds of e-mails a day from those who get the satire and from those who don't.

"What's been the most interesting reaction to me is that I've gotten a lot of black people lately writing me, asking me to work for the service," ayo said. "People have sent their résumés, saying, 'Hey, I'm qualified to do this.' It speaks directly to the piece, which is that a lot of people have been doing this in their community for free and are now ready to sign up for some compensation."

"Reaction has ranged from people being really moved and excited about this work to people being pretty dismayed by it," she said.

Opening Raw Wounds

Those who are offended by the site say that rent-a-negro.com makes fun of hurtful, embarrassing — and all too real — situations. One African-American woman in her mid-20s fears that addressing the issue through satire may make some people believe that racial insensitivity is not a serious problem.



Artist damali ayo set up rent-a-negro.com largely in response to a lifetime of racially insensitive treatment in society. (Basil Childers)

"The first time I saw this, I thought, 'This can't be real. This has got to be some kind of joke,'" said Anne, a marketing manager at publishing company who didn't want her last name revealed. "And then when I saw the title with 'rent' put right before the words, I just decided this was something I didn't need to see.

"Like with the hair and people saying, 'Oh, your hair is so different. Do you have to do something special to get it that way? These are things I've actually experienced and have to go through,'" she said. "I don't think it needs to be said out in public like that. ... And I don't think people will feel any differently about saying some of the things that have been said."

No Laughing Matter

Some critics charge that the site makes light of a non-laughing issue: slavery.

For some, the idea of African-Americans renting themselves out to white "customers" is too akin to a plantation owner bidding for or buying a slave.

"When blackpeopleloveus.com came out, I remember seeing some of my friends who are African-American professionals passing it around, mailing it to their friends," said Mark Naison, a professor of African-American studies at Fordham University in the Bronx, N.Y. "But this site seems — and I get this from just talking to a few people — to have gotten a much more ambiguous reception.

"It comes too close to slavery, which still touches a sore nerve with many people," Naison said. "There are friends of mine — not all — who have wicked senses of humor who told me they were deeply offended and hurt by this site."

Naison, who has his own Web site called brooklynwhiteboy.com, said ayo unwittingly may have stepped on a land mine of emotion with her Web site.

"Slavery is still very much an unresolved issue in this country," Naison said. "This is a time when reparations are a highly prominent issue in the African-American community. Slavery is not a joking matter. ... I'm not exactly sure it's something that should be made light of."

However, others say that while the site pushes the boundaries of good taste and could fool people with its Visa offers and FAQs, it is more provocative than offensive.

"I've seen a whole lot worse than this. I'm not going to be knocking on Jesse Jackson's door for this," said Chris Febles, a multi-ethnic project coordinator for a national charity organization. "It definitely seems a little risqué. But I've been offended by a lot worse things. ... It definitely gets people talking about the way black people are portrayed, certain stereotypes that proliferate in society."

Having No Say — Or Humanity

Some critics have accused ayo of being oversensitive. However, ayo argues that she, and others who have shared her experiences, tend to be treated like objects, not human beings, when some people feel a need to satisfy their curiosity.

"We need to look at how we approach the people in our community," ayo said. "There's a sense of urgency and instancy in the moment that happens that is more commonly used with people who work for us. Like if I talk to somebody who works for me and say 'I need a cup of coffee and want it now,' that's very similar to someone saying, 'I want to touch your hair and I want to touch your hair now.' And you don't have any say in that.

"The fact that people have taken my say out of it is fascinating to me," she said. "I mean, I've had complete strangers come up to me and put their hands in my hair before they've said hello. It kind of reminds me of the way people pick up a cat or pet a dog without asking it. We've taken away a sense of humanity."

Ayo has also been accused of using rent-a-negro.com to generate attention for her artwork, not dialogue — a charge she denies. She had wanted to focus on finishing work for an upcoming art show in the fall.

"I had a creative impulse, and I banged out this Web site in two weeks just to get it out of my mind," said ayo. "It wasn't well-plotted out like that." ■