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**Hon, Guess Who's
Coming to Dinner?
Satirical rent-a-negro.com:
Performance Art With a Jolt**



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The e-mail and Weblog buzz are conflicted. The subject is race, so people are torn. They forward the link, to rent-a-negro.com, without quite knowing what they think of the site. Is it a joke? Why is this funny?

"I don't know if it's genius or heinous," says Vincent Thomas, 24, a project coordinator for American Forest and Paper Association here.

The site offers "the chance to promote your connection with a creative, articulate, friendly, attractive and pleasing African American person," available, for rent, to add flavor to your function.

"Where do you find the people to diversify your life?" the site asks. "What if you don't know any black people? You want to appear up-to-date, but just don't have the human resources."

Thomas thought it was a joke, "but I kept on going through the site and saw it was a real live thing. Even right now I'm still trying to gather my thoughts and come forth with an official stance." Because he has been in those situations, he says. He's been at functions with folks who look to him "for comic relief or to add some type of personality." And maybe black folks should stop giving it away for free.

When a reporter finally tells him the Web site is a satirical piece of performance art by damali ayo, 31, a Portland, Ore.-based artist and personal growth consultant, he is relieved -- but, of course, still conflicted.

Ayo says she got the idea for the piece after years of being in all-white settings, fielding questions from people wanting to touch her hair, and playing the role of cultural ambassador.

"I feel like people are saying, 'You need to serve my ignorance by teaching me,' " she

explained in a telephone interview. "I've said to certain people, 'I don't feel like talking about that now,' but there is really an urgency and an insistence. It's an urgency and an insistence with which we speak to servants or people who are working for us."

She adds: "I understand the white environment because I was forced to learn it. White people are not forced in any capacity to learn about other cultures. I'm not mad about it, but I would like more equity."

Since rent-a-negro went online late last month, ayo -- who eschews capitalization in both her and the site's names -- says she has been e-mailed hundreds of rental applications, from both whites and blacks. Some play along with the satire. "Some people will say, 'I need a Negro to come talk to me and teach me to sing like Aretha Franklin,' " ayo says. But some are obscene or angry; "They say I'm a disgrace to my race or they can't believe a black person would actually be selling themselves and I'm re-invoking slavery," ayo says. About a third are clueless and actually looking to rent her services for a golf outing, a graduation party, a corporate lawyer function. She hasn't answered those yet; she's thinking about turning those requests into the second part of her performance piece.

She is reluctant to divulge more information about her "clients" because the site promises confidentiality. "After a long time of working with white people," she says, "I understand they need to feel so safe just to learn something. My whole life I've had to learn about white culture and I've been markedly unsafe while I'm doing that."

Much of ayo's art focuses on issues of gender and race, and is on view in Portland's Mark Woolley Gallery. She won't say much about her background other than that she grew up in Washington and attended Sidwell Friends School and Brown University in Providence, R.I. She says she legally dropped her last name, and doesn't want to say what it was. "I would prefer to concentrate on my life as an artist," she says.

She will say that in a former incarnation she was a "diversity facilitator" who taught workshops on subjects like communicating with respect.

She still does a few. "I'll pick out a white woman with blond hair and say, 'You look like Lisa Kudrow and Madonna' and three other white women who don't look anything like each other, or her."

She says she's trying to draw attention to the ways people of color are treated differently, but not everybody likes her art. Invitations to lynching parties have come from both blacks and whites angry about the site. "People are very literal," she says. "I understand that."

In Internet chatter about the piece, reaction has been mixed.

"I think it's a fabulous plan," Michelle Jones posted last week on the Weblog Uppity-Negro.com. "You could probably even jack up prices a little bit because you could provide the option of 'the angry black man.' "

On Groovy-Mommy.com, "ebony" said: "When I clicked on the link, I wanted to be amused. Please let this be a MadTV going to the extreme but still make you giggle stuff. I really, really, really wanted to laugh. I didn't."

Richard Zmijewski, 26, of Erie, Pa., thinks the site is a hoot and posted a link to it on his Weblog. Zmijewski says the piece holds a mirror up to all the pretentiousness in race relations. He understands that people are worried about being politically correct about race but should instead "just say yes, I'm ignorant because I didn't grow up with black people around. I have these questions and I don't know how to ask them."

That discomfort with the issue of race, the fear of being wrong, the hesitation to engage, is exactly what ayo says she's trying to satirize. For people who don't know what to think about "rent-a-negro," she hopes their reactions offer points to be explored.

It's a discomfort she struggles with as well. "I have a hard time saying the name of the site some days," she says. "But that means it's exactly where I should be working as an artist."