

“How Do I Rent a Negro?”: Racialized Subjectivity and Digital Performance Art

Brandi Wilkins Catanese

If you direct your Web browser to <http://www.rent-a-negro.com>, it will lead you to a digital performance piece by conceptual artist damali ayo. Launched in late April 2003, the provocative Web site satirizes the persistent objectification of black bodies and culture within American society. Mimicking the style of other Web pages offering commercial products, [rent-a-negro.com](http://www.rent-a-negro.com) purports to offer the very services its name implies. A click on the front page’s “About” link leads to ayo’s explanation of why the site exists: “As times have changed the need for black people in your life has changed but not diminished. The presence of black people in your life can advance business and social reputation.”¹ Therefore, she offers the services of “a creative, articulate, friendly, attractive and pleasing African American person”—i.e., herself—to help “customers” diversify their social and/or professional environments.²

While the viewer might be tempted to believe that the opportunity to rent a Negro is offered metaphorically, the credit card icons at the bottom of the home page belie such nonliteral interpretation. In a cynical rejoinder to the practice of tokenism by which blacks are expected to appreciate their strategic, selective integration into the mainstream of American society, ayo proposes that Web site visitors pay for her services as cultural ambassador and icon of multicultural cool. Going so far as to include a price list and rental request form, which site visitors may submit with details of the particular function for which they want to rent her, ayo’s site inspires questions of motive and consequence: Is this the pinnacle of postmodern praxis or the dangerous nadir of contemporary race relations? Is ayo making a playfully, ruthlessly pragmatic decision to benefit from the multicultural-industrial complex (rather than simply feeling exploited by it), or is she affirming the practice of seeing black bodies and black culture as commodities valuable only in certain circumstances? My discussion assumes the progressive, antiracist intentions of ayo’s Web site: [rent-a-negro.com](http://www.rent-a-negro.com)

Brandi Wilkins Catanese is an assistant professor in the Departments of African American Studies and Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She currently is at work on a book-length project examining racially transgressive performance practices in contemporary American culture.

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 2004 ATHE conference. I am grateful to my co-panelists as well as the audience for their feedback on my ideas. I also wish to thank Harry Elam, Shannon Steen, and the anonymous reader for their feedback on the most recent iteration of the paper.

¹ www.rent-a-negro.com/negrofaqs.html. Accessed May 1, 2005.

² *Ibid.*

satirically deploys the languages of capitalism and multiculturalism in order to question the definitions of race upon which a black presence within this multicultural framework relies. At the same time, the piece exploits and undermines the racial assumptions that govern cyberspace; the efficacy of ayo's critique relies upon a subversive racialization process that incites new understandings of virtual communities' mechanisms for authenticating racial membership.

In this essay, I will situate ayo's digital performance piece within the discourses of race, performativity, and cyberculture in an effort to understand how her satirical Web site functions within a larger framework of black artistic practice that questions received truths about black subjectivity. I will focus my attention on the rental request form in order to discuss the performances of race that the site generates from both ayo and potential customers, and investigate the ways in which compromised corporeality challenges our understanding of racial identity. My analysis is organized along two lines of inquiry: How does race function in cyberspace, and on rent-a-negro.com in particular? And, how does ayo use cyberspace to offer lessons about the ethics of performing race that can be carried back into the more explicitly material world of face-to-face interaction?

Digitizing Racial Performativity

Rent-a-negro.com is disarming in its synthesis of simplicity and audacity. Comprising a vivid but limited color palette of black, blue, white, red, and yellow-orange, the site is heavy on words but light on images other than those authenticating its commercial efficacy.³ Beginning with the name of the site, ayo willfully challenges the contemporary code of racial ethics by referring to herself, an African American in today's parlance, as a Negro. While this contemporary use of anachronistic terms has been employed by other artists before ayo,⁴ this is no self-reflexive critique of black identity. Instead, ayo explains it as a critique of the dominant culture: "I use the word Negro very deliberately, and that's because the kind of behaviors that we're talking about happening . . . should be as outdated as the word Negro."⁵ In other words, ayo is aware of the performative power of objectifying behavior: thinking of black people as valued accessories to an appropriately liberal, diverse life renders them Negroes rather than self-possessed subjects in their interaction with the dominant culture. From the first, the project employs the nebulous linguistic territory of euphemism, in which "rent" supplants "exploit," "Negro" supplants "black" or "African American," and audiences are left pondering the change that these euphemistic shifts actually

³ Since rent-a-negro.com launched in 2003, ayo has made several subtle alterations to the site, most of which simply involve revising the wording of the rental request form and service descriptions. However, the most significant changes betray the page's satirical intentions by linking visitors to the opportunity to purchase actual goods inspired by the site: t-shirts, mugs, tokens, mousepads, etc.

⁴ E.g., George C. Wolfe's 1989 recognition of the madness and "colored contradictions" inherent in "black/Negro/colored Americans" (*The Colored Museum*, in *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans: The Recent Period, 1935–Today*, ed. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996], 451–72); or Amiri Baraka's reference to assimilationist "kneegrows" in his Black Arts Movement play, *Slave Ship* (Newark: Jihad Productions, 1969).

⁵ damali ayo, interview by Bill O'Reilly, *The O'Reilly Factor*, Fox News, June 22, 2005. In this context, ayo was speaking to O'Reilly about *How to Rent a Negro*, the aforementioned book companion to/extension of the Web site.

offer. Are the misunderstandings to which ayo responds any less offensive when the objectification that they inflict upon black subjects is coupled with remuneration?

Although ayo has since published a book, *How to Rent a Negro*, as a companion to the Web site, originating this project within the medium of digital technology allows her indictment of contemporary racialized interaction to function even more incisively. The (relative) newness of Internet art highlights the stubbornly persistent yet outmoded temporality of cultural practices that turn black subjects into Negro objects. Furthermore, rent-a-negro.com employs the seemingly limitless proliferation of digital commerce in order to demonstrate that celebrations of the infinite possibilities new media afford to contemporary society fail to account fully for the role that technology can now play in reiterating tropes of blackness in the cultural arena. Positioned relative to cyberculture scholars such as Sherry Turkle, who describes the Internet as a place where postmodern ideas of fluid, decentered identity might finally receive practical—if illusory—application,⁶ rent-a-negro.com instead suggests that ayo's postmodern experience of virtuality is not one of fluidity in which she leaves behind the material constraints of race, even for a short while. Instead, echoing Cameron Bailey's assertion that "[c]ybersubjectivity promises the fantasy of disembodied communication, but . . . remains firmly connected to bodies through the imaginative act required to project into cyberspace,"⁷ ayo renegotiates the terms according to which her body functions within the virtual realm. Locating herself conspicuously in this arena represents an effort to take control (commercial, if not signficatory) over her raced and gendered presence in contemporary American society, allowing ayo to focus attention on the extent to which "existing racial discourses find their way into cyberspace, not simply as content but as part of the structure shaping the place."⁸

But what exactly are the racializing structures that shape cyberspace? Central to the idea of the Internet as a spatial phenomenon is the sense that users gain membership in a discrete community. Rather than considering the Internet an ephemeral site where information is simply stored and retrieved, cyberspace is framed as a place to which one travels as a visitor, requiring an awareness of, and facility with, the protocols (Netiquette) that will allow for successful participation in this adjacent cultural space. Once cyberspace gains legitimacy as an alternate world within which one can establish residence, the questions of segregation, mobility, distribution of resources, and ownership of space and knowledge that characterize material/real life suddenly become relevant as analytical tools there as well. How one gains access to the Internet, which sites one visits, how one presents oneself in the many venues that online communication offers (email addresses, personal Web sites, chat rooms, etc.), all bear relationships to the patterns of self-knowledge and interaction that are practiced IRL (in real life).

However, the structural dimensions of race in cyberspace are twofold: access and (self-)representation are instructive lenses through which to assess the symmetries of race IRL and race online. If one accepts, as I do, the utility of Michael Omi and Howard

⁶ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

⁷ Cameron Bailey, "Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace," in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Ann Moser and Douglas MacLeod (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

Winant's seminal definition of race as "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of bodies,"⁹ and by extension their discussion of racialization as the process through which racial meaning comes to frame social structures, then how does one understand the transference of this concept into a space where we have no constant access to bodies? At the very least, we must heed the admonitions of cyberculture scholars such as N. Katherine Hayes, who insists that "our bodies are no less actively involved in the construction of virtuality than in the construction of everyday life,"¹⁰ and work to understand how the "social conflicts and interests" of material culture have informed the development of this alternate realm. At the most basic level, this is irrefutable: the physical and intellectual labors required to produce virtuality are enacted by individuals who are acculturated products of the racialized society in which they live, which influences everything from the aesthetic preferences that shape the work of Web designers to the demographics of individuals who have access to online connectivity. Cyberscholars have long noted the "digital divide" that reflects and (re)produces raced and classed disparities in computer literacy,¹¹ and there is no reason to believe that this focus on the divide at the end-user stage is not intimately linked to a divide in the arena of production.¹² If anything, the construction of virtual worlds substantiates claims that social constructionist scholars looking at practices of racial and gendered performativity have long made about the real/material world. Cyberculture offers the opportunity to gain a clear systemic awareness of the ways in which behavioral tropes are codified into social systems. Our ability to view the development of the Internet in real time through the prism of these poststructuralist precepts (rather than retrofitting human history with theories most clearly articulated in the mid- to late twentieth century) disproves the natural, inevitable status of racial meaning within American culture and exposes what Richard Schechner refers to as the "restored behaviors"¹³ that constitute performative identity categories.

By linking cybercultural discourse with theories of racial performativity, we can understand that race is embedded in the production of virtuality, a fact which then delimits the racialized possibilities for participation in those sites. Opportunities for (self-)representation get funneled through the systems developed by programmers whose racial value systems are embedded in the worlds they have constructed. For example, Beth Kolko has analyzed the ways in which "the *construction* of 'raceless'

⁹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

¹⁰ N. Katherine Hayes, "Embodied Virtuality: or How to Put Bodies Back into the Picture," in Moser and MacLeod, *Immersed in Technology*, 1.

¹¹ E.g., Raneta Lawson Mack, *The Digital Divide: Standing at the Intersection of Race and Technology* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2001); Karen Mossberger et al., *Virtual Inequality: Beyond the Digital Divide* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003); The Digital Divide Network, <http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org>.

¹² However, I do not want to essentialize this divide, as activists in many arenas are challenging it. For example, under the leadership of Anna Everett, UC Santa Barbara's Center for Black Studies has established the Race and Technology Initiative as well as the annual AfroGEEKS conference, both of which are dedicated to exposing the central role that new media can play (and are playing) within black communities, both domestically and internationally.

¹³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 141.

interfaces affects the communicative possibilities of virtual worlds" [emphasis added].¹⁴ The fact that certain virtual worlds have been constructed to disallow the communication of the experience of race does not automatically mean that such experience fails to take place. Neil Gotanda's famous critique of colorblindness seems appropriate here: "nonrecognition [i.e., racelessness] is self-contradictory. Not only that—nonrecognition fosters the systematic denial of racial subordination and the psychological repression of an individual's recognition of that subordination, thereby allowing it to continue."¹⁵ In other words, removing the tools through which Netizens can express themselves as racialized beings does not transform the virtual realm into a utopic ideal in which race-based perception has been eradicated. It simply eliminates systemic tools through which race—more specifically understood as nonwhiteness—can be framed as anything other than the inconvenient and inappropriate baggage of the user.

Perhaps the most impassioned critic of the racial practices of cyberspace is Kalí Tal, whose oft-cited "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberculture" notes with concern that "in cyberspace, it is finally possible to completely and utterly disappear people of color."¹⁶ Without the visible presence of black bodies, what few elements of black culture do garner recognition in this alternate space are always assumed to be directed to "the *white* self [. . .] This privileged white self becomes the normative self, the 'we' . . . unfortunately, of most of the Net."¹⁷ Blackness is always only an object, and never a subject, in this digitized realm. damali ayo's Internet installation accepts that object status in order to critique it, while the fact of her artistic license subverts it as well: even as rent-a-negro.com draws attention to the objectification of blackness in the real/material world, ayo's labor in designing the Web site¹⁸ destabilizes the normative virtual(ly white) self that eludes the communicative frameworks of race, granting her subjecthood. Her perspectives and aesthetic preferences guide the production of her corner of virtuality, and center a nonwhite point of view within the territory she claims for her project.

This element of subversion in ayo's artistic practice is consistent with Rachel Greene's description of the origins of Internet art. Claiming a lineage that weaves from Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists to the Happenings of the Fluxus movement, Greene asserts that this genre "is generally a more marginal and oppositional form, often uniting parody, functionality and activism under a single umbrella, actively

¹⁴ Beth Kolko, "Erasing @race: Going White in the (Inter)Face," in *Race in Cyberspace*, ed. Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 214.

¹⁵ Neil Gotanda, "A Critique of 'Our Constitution is Color-Blind,'" in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 35.

¹⁶ Kalí Tal, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberculture." <http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/FAS/Bromley/classes/socprac/readings/Kali-Tal-unbearable.htm>. Accessed May 1, 2005.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Here I want to distinguish Web site design from Web site programming: ayo certainly made the key choices about what www.rent-a-negro.com would look like, but she may not have been the one creating the codes that constitute the site. Even in the event that she delegated that task to another, ayo's status as creator of the Web site still grants her a voice that is often presumed to be held out of reach of cybersubjects who experience blackness in the material/real world.

reclaiming public space."¹⁹ This categorization is especially significant for ayo, as the combination of her race and her gender doubly relegates her to the margins of virtuality. At the same time, though, the interactive element of rent-a-negro.com works with and against the tenets of performance art. According to Peggy Phelan, "Performance, as object-less art, works against (if never fully eliminating) the commodification of the art object and the socio-economic and psychic violence the object often fosters."²⁰ If this is the case, what is the synthesis of performance and cyber-discourses that ayo is able to achieve in transplanting her resistance from the material to the digital realm? In rent-a-negro.com, ayo appears to offer herself up as the art object, simultaneously inviting and stymieing the process of commodification that seems to define blackness (and often, black femaleness in particular) in contemporary cultural practice. Drawing attention to the psychic violence that blacks endure when they are Negro-ed by acts of objectification seems to be ayo's primary goal. However, because ayo invites people to wish for her object status without actually delivering herself as such, applying Phelan's definition requires an awareness of multiple objects functioning within this parodic project: ayo is the object-less art piece, but the audience, rendered vulnerable once they expose a desire to appropriate blackness that goes unconsummated in the relationship ayo establishes, become objectified by their lack of agency. Therefore, in this instance of performance as objectless art, the resistance to psychic and socioeconomic violence emerges not from a resistance to recognizing any object, but from the inversion of the ways in which the subject/object relationship is traditionally racialized, both in the realm of the arts and in everyday social experience.

In foregrounding her ability to express her racialized subjectivity in cyberspace, ayo's Web site has performative affect: it produces the reality that it attempts to describe. Enticing visitors to enter into a satirical relationship with her, ayo then challenges the assumption that practices of objectification that occur easily within everyday life will occur as easily in cyberspace. By offering site visitors a role in producing and refuting the commodity-impulse that helps to structure race relations, rent-a-negro.com both mirrors and distorts the social component of racial meaning that we experience in everyday life. Even without bodies as the material sites for negotiation of conflict, cyberspace offers mechanisms through which we may construct ourselves and others as racial beings.

"Your Own White Privilege": The Ethics of Play

In this essay, I have suggested that ayo's digital project has both discursive and ethical dimensions (as if the two are ever divisible). However, damali ayo is not the only black artist challenging sacrosanct codes about the reverence with which we must approach racial discourse. Artists such as Adrian Piper, Carrie Mae Weems, Michael Ray Charles, Kara Walker, Tana Hargest, and Mendi+Keith Obadike have variously criticized the ways in which whiteness and blackness are deployed within artistic institutions and quotidian patterns of socialization. Michael D. Harris identifies the strategies such work often employs as inversion, recontextualization, and reappro-

¹⁹ Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 11–12.

²⁰ Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001), 29.

priation, yet he asks, "Are these strategies truly effective or merely diversionary chimera?"²¹ The answer may lie, in part, in the types of responses the art works accommodate.

Of the artists I mentioned above, Tana Hargest and Mendi+Keith Obadike also use digital media satirically to offer their indictments of contemporary racial practices, and, interestingly, also locate their critiques in the realm of commerce. For the Studio Museum in Harlem exhibition *Freestyle*, Hargest shared an interactive CD-ROM for Bitter Nigger, Inc., which marketed, among other things, pharmaceutical products, a concept that emerged from Hargest's "fundamental assumption that difficult concepts—especially those concerning race in America—are easier to consider if packaged as purchasable items."²² Mendi+Keith Obadike jointly created the 2002 Internet piece *The Interaction of Coloreds*, advertising the IOC Color Check System, which would use "patented technology . . . [to offer] more precise readings of the body online" in a brilliant response to anxiety about the racial subterfuge made possible by the invisibility the Internet affords.²³ This piece followed Keith Obadike's 2001 *Blackness for Sale*, which used eBay in an effort to profit from the extreme marketability of blackness at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

One of the key features that distinguish interactive digital art from other more traditional forms of art is the way in which interactivity facilitates audiences' response to the work. While all artists, presumably, want to elicit a response from their audiences, digital interactive art requires the externalization of that response, and builds said response into the work itself. Hargest, Obadike, and ayo provide systems through which the questions their work poses may be answered.²⁴ How interested are you in using medical science to transform your racialized participation in American culture? Click here! What price would you place on claiming someone else's blackness for yourself? Submit your maximum bid now! Under what circumstances would you objectify a black person? Fill out the rental request form!

Rent-a-negro.com may be ayo's most famous piece in a career comprising a series of works that interrogate the processes of identity formation in contemporary culture along raced and gendered lines. She defines her work as "dialogue-driven conceptual art that engages contemporary social issues through the media of visual, virtual, written and performance art. [. . . Her] work is performative in its relentless desire to engage the audience and generate an audience reaction as an on-site companion piece."²⁵ Thus, by her own admission, ayo sees audience participation as a component of the work itself, and even wittily conveys this within one of her pieces. In *ontology*

²¹ Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 192.

²² Debra Singer, "Tana Hargest," in *Freestyle*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 40.

²³ Mendi+Keith Obadike, "The Interaction of Coloreds," <http://www.blacknetart.com/HR.html>. Accessed July 15, 2005.

²⁴ Obviously, the greatest distinction is to be found between interactive digital art and other (purely) visual works of art. However, I will address the differences between digital performance art and embodied performance art later in this essay.

²⁵ <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/damali%20ayo%20dot%20com/pages/statement.htm>. Accessed May 1, 2005.

(2001), a found pair of Black Americana²⁶ salt and pepper shakers discuss ayo's work; the male shaker says, "her fundamental conceptual strategy is to implicate the spectator as complicit—not only in the society manufacturing such constructs, but in the art itself as audience is unwittingly transformed into medium."²⁷ This strategy seems quite clear in rent-a-negro.com, as the act of completing the rental form makes site visitors' subjectivity a part of rent-a-negro.com itself.

Audience responsiveness forms a throughline for much of ayo's oeuvre, whether these responses are as structured as the rent-a-negro.com request form or as ostensibly passive as bearing living witness to her investigations of methods through which racializing tendencies that marginalize blackness function in the present as reminders of the past. She describes her 2001 exhibition, *shift: we are not yet done*, as "an exploration of contemporary racism using everyday objects and cultural icons."²⁸ In addition to a critique of the Rolling Stones' song *Brown Sugar* and an exposé of Mickey Mouse's minstrel antecedents making him a "monument to racist mockery of black people," *shift* includes an on-site performance called *race tags*, in which audience members receive seemingly common adhesive identification tags on which "Hello my name is" becomes "Hello my race is . . ." Patrons are offered the classifications black, white, or other. The familiar ID tag is transformed, deployed not for the more individual naming ritual but to catalog racial membership, a playful instantiation of the pressure to see and be seen in narrow racial terms before other aspects of one's identity are considered. As *race tags* demonstrates, racial identity is not simply a private fact but also a public and social negotiation, an act of affiliation as well as an imposition. Furthermore, *race tags* underscores the imperfection of this discursive system, as demonstrated by those who become othered by the piece. In invoking the binary of black/white politics and blithely homogenizing all else as "other," ayo demonstrates the limited agency available to people within the performative discourse of race.

I mention *race tags* because its process of racial subjectification provides an interesting counterpoint to rent-a-negro.com in several ways: first, *race tags* takes place in the material world of live, person-to-person interaction, while rent-a-negro.com operates in the remote world of cyberspace, where invisibility and disembodiment mediate person-to-person interaction. The processes of sociocorporeal ratification that regulate the racial economy of *race tags* are not similarly available within rent-a-negro's e-economy. Rather than an attendant deeming you black, white, or other after a physical inspection, your race online is seemingly produced by your behavior alone, and its intersection with the degree to which an interface allows you to register that racial identity. Additionally, *race tags* acknowledges the problematics of the simultaneously overflowing and empty signifier of the racial other. While the heterogeneity of those defined as other is elided, the label does provide an alternative to the essentialist definitions of black and white that form the center of American racial discourse

²⁶ "Black Americana" is a collector's euphemism for racist memorabilia. See David Pilgrim, "The Garbage Man: Why I Collect Racist Objects," <http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/collect/>. Accessed May 1, 2005.

²⁷ <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/damali%20ayo%20dot%20com/pages/gallery2.htm>. Accessed May 1, 2005.

²⁸ <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/damali%20ayo%20dot%20com/pages/exhibitions.htm>. Accessed May 1, 2005.

(although this alternative is assigned rather than claimed). Conversely, rent-a-negro.com seems to offer its customer/consumer only one racialized subject position: whiteness.

In the homogeneity of the spectator position ayo affords rent-a-negro audiences, she knowingly replicates the assumptions that structure much of cyberspace. Although, as David Crane suggests, "cyberspace still generally connotes an 'other' world ontologically and phenomenologically distinct from the real one,"²⁹ Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert Rodman remind us that "users bring their assumptions and discursive patterns regarding race with them when they log on, and when the medium is interactive, they receive such assumptions and patterns as well."³⁰ Although ayo's Web site does not offer the real-time interaction that other forms of online communication such as Multi-User Domains (MUDs) do, it does indeed invite and disseminate certain assumptions about race that we learn in the real world in order to, in her words, "reflect society back to itself in a kind of mirror."³¹ The society she recreates through rent-a-negro.com is one in which "you" are always white, a default which makes common sense of the process of "subjectively objectifying"³² herself as a black woman that ayo stages with this project. The structure of rent-a-negro.com seems to support Beth Kolko's description of how the Internet produces raced subjects: she writes, "technology interfaces carry the power to prescribe representative norms and patterns, constructing a self-replicating and exclusionary category of 'ideal' user, one that, in some very particular instances of cyberspace, is a definitively white user."³³ Rent-a-negro.com certainly falls within that category, but what does "definitively white" mean when no one can see you?

In keeping with Cameron Bailey's discussion of race in cyberspace, we must ask, what produces "the special glow of virtual skin"?³⁴ When there are no cabs to be hailed and no jobs to be gotten, is black-identified the same as black? Once we take for granted that there are in fact a host of raced and gendered people participating in online activity, we assume that they exert complete control over the ways in which their race signifies (or does not). The acts of communication that form the basis for virtual identification (as definition and as affinity) are meant to reflect our experiences in the real/material world. Yet, without the forced compatibility of what one looks like and what one says, cyberspace seems to transform identity from a negotiation between the signals one's physical presence gives off and the ways in which our behavior modifies these signals, into a pure representation of a freely determined, true self unfettered by external misapprehension. However, as Lisa Nakamura explains, such self-determination is not strictly coterminous with (racial) truth: she refers to the "identity tourist" as "one who engages in superficial, reversible, recreational play at otherness, a person who is

²⁹ David Crane, "In Medias Race: Filmic Representation, Networked Communication, and Racial Intermediation," in Kolko et al., *Race in Cyberspace*, 87–116.

³⁰ Kolko et al., *Race in Cyberspace*, 9.

³¹ <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/damali%20ayo%20dot%20com/pages/interview.htm>. Accessed May 1, 2005.

³² <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/damali%20ayo%20dot%20com/pages/interview2001.htm>. Accessed May 1, 2005.

³³ Kolko, "Erasing @race," 218.

³⁴ Bailey, "Virtual Skin," 32.

satisfied with an episodic experience as a racial minority.”³⁵ In her book *Cybertypes*, Nakamura goes on to suggest that identity tourism, rather than fostering understanding between different racial groups, reinforces misunderstanding through its reliance upon stereotypes. However, her definition focuses on those who pass down from the white summit of the racial hierarchy, rather than on other moves disembodied users might make to assume different identities. Acts of passing up for white by accepting the defaults of cyberspace’s racial discourse are seen as nonthreatening because they preserve “the integrity of the national sense of self that is defined as white.”³⁶

Nakamura’s observation offers an instructive insight into the situational malleability of race in American culture. Cyberspace takes us through the looking glass into the perverse inverse of America’s racial logic. In cyberspace, all acts of passing seem to ratify the status quo one way or another: passing up for white demonstrates one’s proficiency with (if not adoption of) the attitudes that preserve a white “national sense of self”; in Nakamura’s characterization, passing down to a nonwhite identity seems only to happen in an effort to appropriate and/or objectify nonwhiteness in the service of some fantasy that coalesces with the very same “national sense of self.” Conversely, in embodied practice, all forms of racial passing “challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics,” doing so in both qualitative and quantitative terms.³⁷ For whiteness, this foundation is shaken as much when one who was not born into whiteness performs her way into it, gaining access to the social and economic privileges that subtend an ostensibly biologically secure category, as it is when someone born into whiteness insults the category by—unfathomably—choosing to leave behind its comforts and alleged superiority. Examining these practices side by side proves that articulations of race and power remain equally and deeply invested in the biological and the behavioral understandings of racial meaning, because, as Althusser reminds us, “There is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus.”³⁸

While rent-a-negro.com does exploit a whiteness that *How to Rent a Negro* later defines as pertaining to “descendents of European and some Semitic people. Confusing due to the word’s association with all things good,”³⁹ the site does so in a way that challenges the category in an effort to force white ignorance to take responsibility for itself. Whereas whiteness as neutrality is usually attributed to its alleged vacuity as a racial category, ayo’s white customer is anything but benign. Curiosity over the home page notwithstanding, each decision to click a link that ventures more deeply into the site increases the viewer’s entrenchment within the white user perspective that structures ayo’s relationship with site visitors. Therefore, it is not the specificity of embodiment that ayo uses to construct her “ideal white user.” Instead, she exploits the

³⁵ Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 37. At the same time, Nakamura also cites the term “black panic,” coined by *New York Times* reporter Dana Canady to describe the cognitive dissonance instantiated for some of her business contacts when they met her in person, after having had only telephone contact with her previously (142).

³⁷ Elaine K. Ginsberg, “Introduction: The Politics of Passing,” in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 4.

³⁸ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984), 18.

³⁹ damali ayo, *How to Rent a Negro* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2005), 56.

disembodiedness of the Internet and makes the act of looking, along with Cameron Bailey's "imaginative act required to project into cyberspace," the determinants of racial subjectivity online. Just as Laura Mulvey argued for the male gaze as a functional apparatus that was not coterminous with male bodies watching films,⁴⁰ so does rent-a-negro.com both produce and rely upon the white gaze as the digital apparatus that helps to construct the meaning of ayo's performance project.

While this white gaze structures the ways in which ayo is knowable to her viewers through the Web site, the project also offers viewers opportunities to know themselves racially, positing blackness and alterity as cultural competencies or modes of reading rather than mere bodily facts. Although Internet art is not constrained by temporal logic in the ways that other media are, linear time does help to explain the racial awareness that rent-a-negro.com gradually fosters. In all likelihood, audiences experience the "Home" page first, which offers testimonials from satisfied customers. The primary objective of the home page is to establish the commercial credibility of the project, providing the veneer of respectability by employing the formal properties of e-commerce: testimonials intimate the services the site offers, the list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) promises to allay any concerns that viewers might have, and the credit card logos promise the integrity of any financial relationship that will ensue between the site (ayo) and the viewer.⁴¹ Shock, offense, and/or curiosity might propel viewers to the next page, "About," on which ayo explains the rationale behind the service in greater detail and attempts to entice site viewers into becoming customers. Text written in the second person asserts a level of familiarity with the viewer, as ayo promises, "your comfort and enjoyment are valued," and reciprocates by offering a bit of biographical information about herself.⁴² Taken together, the "Home" and "About" pages establish the parameters of the hoax as well as the two interactive subject positions the hoax will sustain: the renter and the rented. Some viewers will understand the joke as such, while others will have been fooled into believing the site's offer of services is real.

The remaining pages offer crucial opportunities for racial differentiation. The "Pricing" page functions as the first litmus test. After absorbing the premise of the site, visitors who recognize their own experiences in the tasks ayo offers to complete for pay are authenticated as black/identified viewers. If people have "Touch[ed Your] Hair," "Compare[d Their] Skin Tone to Yours," or asked you to "Challeng[e] Racist Family Members,"⁴³ you have earned the right to laugh at the Web site from the perspective of one who understands the frustrations that motivated ayo to create it.⁴⁴ You are demonstrating your awareness that "[b]lack humor most often satirizes the demeaning views of non-blacks, celebrates the unique attributes of black community

⁴⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3: 6–18.

⁴¹ Indeed, I taught a class in which, without prejudice, I instructed students to view the Web site. Several students began by thinking that the site had to be a joke, but were swayed by the credit card icons into believing that it was real.

⁴² <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/negroabout.html>. Accessed May 1 2005.

⁴³ <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/negropricing.html>. Accessed May 1, 2005.

⁴⁴ Or, conversely, to take offense, as some have, at the thought that the site trivializes the ways in which blacks continue to suffer dehumanization at the hands of the dominant culture.

life, or focuses on outwitting the oppressor."⁴⁵ You may view the site as a coping mechanism, a perverse wish-fulfillment fantasy.⁴⁶ If you do not share muscle memory with any of these objectifying experiences, then you are white/identified in relation to the site. However, you may recognize the tasks that any indicates she will no longer perform without compensation, and you may want to disavow the behaviors the site criticizes. For these viewers, the Web site becomes an instruction manual: the "Pricing" page functions as a "what not to do" list against offensive interracial contact and provides an opportunity for reflection on one's past potential racial sins. The last broad category of responses falls victim to what Richard Schechner refers to as "dark play," in which "some of the players don't know they are playing" and which "subverts order, dissolves frames, and breaks its own rules."⁴⁷ These visitors might be seduced into revealing their desire to appropriate blackness, but are denied the satisfaction of having that wish fulfilled, even at a price. White/identifiedness therefore splits into self-conscious and, for lack of a better word, duped subgroups.

The "FAQs" page is inserted between the "Pricing" and "Rent Now!" pages, and serves dual purposes: for two of the three groups identified above (black/identified and self-conscious white/identified), the FAQs alleviate curiosity and expose just how far any is willing to take her concept. For the duped viewer, the FAQs offer a promise of feasibility for the relationship that the site claims to sell, cultural awkwardness notwithstanding. Finally, as the interactive component of the project, the "Rent Now!" page offers a last opportunity to self-identify racially, but also ushers in an ethical crisis. Overall, rent-a-negro.com demands that its audiences assume the (perhaps fictive) role of majoritarian subject with a racially segregated life, and if visitors simply view the pages of the Web site but fail to succumb to the sales pitch, this summons is incomplete, as it fails to pull them into the realm of the externally performative. Their structured white gaze is somewhat passive, in that they accept the looking relationship that any has consciously built into the site but do not act on the privileges associated with their position. Yet in choosing not to become customers of the service, audiences limit the version of white or white-identified subject that they will allow themselves to become, in a strange way retaining greater agency than if they do participate in the performance. Their conscientious objection to the demands that the site makes of whiteness demonstrates the potential for transforming that identity category from one inevitably aligned with exploitation. If, instead, they complete any's rental request form, they are accepting a deeper level of affiliation with the whiteness that any wants to satirize: even without the body to substantiate the subject position, any customers can become white/identified through their willingness to commodify damali any.

Regardless of the racial status earned by passing through the previous four pages of the site, submitting the rental request form seems to be the sine qua non of total absorption into the white/identified space of the normative virtual self. The form threatens to level the distinctions between black/identified recognition, self-conscious

⁴⁵ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African American Humor, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1994), 29.

⁴⁶ Let me be clear: the wish being fulfilled with this Web site is not to be objectified, but rather to profit from rather than simply be victimized by the economic imperatives that motivate such practices of racial objectification.

⁴⁷ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 106–7.

white/identifiedness, and dupe status. According to ayo, "This service comes without the commitment of learning about racism, challenging your own white privilege, or being labeled 'radical.'"⁴⁸ Therefore, completing the rental form produces an implicit admission of possessing some degree of white privilege, whether or not one believes herself to have an embodied experience of this. Suddenly, the FAQ "How do I rent a Negro?"⁴⁹ becomes not a procedural but an ethical question that raises the stakes of the entire project by demanding a very personal decision by each visitor. How do I, for example, as a black woman, rent a Negro and thereby lay claim to the white privilege that the work indicts? More importantly, why would I want to engage in this dark play? In the raced and raceless interface that is the request form, how do I register my blackness, and therefore my disidentification with the easy white privilege that this site attempts to critique? Without the silent salience of my black body, how do I ironize my rental request?

While it may be difficult to understand why site visitors would want to assume the role of the dupe in order to become a customer of rent-a-negro.com, ayo's potential motive in requesting this racial charade from all of her visitors is clearer. By offering a combination of structured and relatively free responses, the site mimics the paradoxical autonomy and restrictiveness of our racial experiences and especially requires contemplating the effect of these experiences upon black people. The "successful" audience engagement with the piece seems to be the one that is willing to do as the Web site requests and "examine the impact of black people in your environment and discuss this openly in your rental agreement."⁵⁰ However imaginary the business is, the questions that it provokes are quite real. ayo herself says that "audience response becomes a live and dynamic part of the work," and viewers/customers must think carefully about the dynamic contributions that they wish to make to the meaning and cultural efficacy of rent-a-negro.com. Will their contributions be dishonest honesty ("this isn't me, but I'm giving you a glimpse of the sort of person who would want this service"), or honest dishonesty ("I know you won't really rent yourself out to me, but here's what I'd ask for if you actually would")?

Conclusion: The Ethics of In/visibility

ayo has acknowledged receiving hundreds (and by now, I'm sure, thousands) of responses that fall into three camps: those that play along, those that are angry, and those that do not understand the site is insincere and actually wish to pay ayo for her services.⁵¹ In order to assess the significance of such cultural activity, rent-a-negro.com requires us to grapple with both the invisibility of ethics and the ethics of invisibility at the same time. What does it mean to objectify ayo when no one sees you doing so, and if no one (including ayo) can see you doing it, is it still wrong? Earlier in this essay,

⁴⁸ <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/negroabout.html>. Accessed May 1 2005.

⁴⁹ <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/negrofaqs.html>. Accessed May 1, 2005.

⁵⁰ <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/negroabout.html>. Accessed July 26, 2004. As of 15 July 2005, this is no longer the wording of the question. ayo has revised the form to make it subtly less confrontational, now asking, "Do you have previous experience with black people?" "Please describe." <http://www.rent-a-negro.com/negorental.html>. Accessed July 15, 2005.

⁵¹ Lonnae O'Neal Parker, "Hon, Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?; Satirical rent-a-negro.com: Performance Art With a Jolt," *Washington Post* 28 May 2003: C01. Incidentally, many of these responses are published in *How to Rent a Negro*.

I drew a distinction between the externalization of response that interactive digital art affords its audiences and the internalization of response that seems more characteristic of other disembodied visual art forms. This assessment does not properly account for the rich tradition of performance art, in which artists demand embodied, externalized responses to their work. The difference between digital and embodied performance art is related to ethics: in its impersonal nature, digital performance art uses the structural means of retreat in order to achieve the ethical ends of advance. By providing an invisible opportunity to participate in racial dialogue that is less constrained by physical mobility or embodied social expertise, more people are afforded the opportunity of participating in the ethical project of expanding and augmenting racial discourse. Whereas embodied performance art often provides opportunities for the externalization of audience response, the impact of any one work is determined by the number of people it can reach at one time. Conversely, digital performance art defies many of the constraints of time and place that circumscribe material art in order to expand its reach into our social framework.

The lack of real-time, bodily accountability for our online behavior (which may include acts of hate and/or deception) suggests that there is no such thing as blackness, only black-identified-ness, in the virtual realm. As I mentioned before, *race tags* offers its audience-participants no such black-identified-ness, no chance for their behavior to supercede the racial stories their bodies tell. Conversely, the online potential for equal access to and participation in histories into which we were not biologically born distends the meaning of race to allow for imagined communities of an entirely different sort. In her Web-art-performance work, damali ayo seems both to rely upon the essentialist definitions of race that created the misapprehensions *rent-a-negro.com* critiques, and also to want to destroy these, in offering one mode of interaction that allows/requires participants to assume the position of white subject even if it involves an act of racial masquerade. Her setup attempts to challenge Lisa Nakamura's claim that passing toward whiteness is unthreatening. She aims to demonstrate that in contemporary society whiteness is a mode of behavior more than a particular type of body; perhaps the fact that all people have equal opportunity or responsibility to answer the question "Have you ever used black people?" is ayo's way of forcing the question of racial accountability and community into another sphere in which we do not use bodies as excuses for the oversimplification of the conversation about how racism, as a discursive and a bodily practice, exacts such a toll from all of American society. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw's depiction of Kara Walker, another controversial young African American woman artist, seems apt here: like Walker, ayo "has been allowed to critique the dominant culture virtually unfettered by its proponents in part because she does not spare her own community in the exercise."⁵² In *rent-a-negro.com*, the liberatory potential and benefits of re-evaluating racialized behaviors affect both blackness and whiteness.

⁵² Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakeable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 118. It is nevertheless important to acknowledge the differing levels of entrenchment within the mainstream art world that distinguish Walker from ayo: Walker has received several marks of mainstream approval, including a MacArthur Fellowship, and is controversial in part because her fame and professional opportunities have so rapidly eclipsed those of older artists in her field. ayo, while certainly in possession of a body of provocative and engaging work, is likely only at the beginning of her professional notoriety.

The ethical ambiguity of cyberspace, in which anonymity is heightened, has become a very potent vehicle for fostering conversations about race. Performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, whose work often invites audiences to find and/or expose their inner racist, transplanted his cultural project to the Internet with his 1995 online "Temple of Confessions," in which site visitors could "confess [their] intercultural cyber sins."⁵³ According to Gomez-Peña, "The total anonymity offered by the Internet, along with the invitation to discuss painful and sensitive matters of race and identity in an artificially safe environment, seems to allow for the surfacing of forbidden or forgotten zones of the psyche. In a sense, through digital technology, we enabled thousands of Internet users to involuntarily collaborate with us in the creation of a new socio-cultural mythology of the Latino and the Indigenous 'Other.'"⁵⁴ The idea that Internet users are "involuntarily" contributing to a racial project that they don't understand compromises the authority with which the normative Internet user is commonly invested. Within the context of rent-a-negro.com, the duped visitors fulfill the same function, involuntarily helping ayo expose the persistence of certain counterproductive racial practices.

Overall, rent-a-negro.com sculpts and catalogs a dialogue on interracial contact that has, to borrow Lisa Blackman's language about a different interactive Web art piece, "transformative potential":

It forces us to confront the way we draw limits around what we take so-called normality to be. It resignifies those terms, images, and languages central to our subjectification and shows how they function to maintain a particular regulatory ideal we hold up to ourselves. It shows the contingency of these terms by exploring the gaps, silences, and contradictions created through these regulatory images, i.e. the way that certain people, behaviours and experiences are simply thrust into oblivion, signifying as "other" within the cultural landscape. It produces a range of affects—not pleasure—but difficult emotions that lock into our deepest psychic and social defences.⁵⁵

Blackman's characterization of the potential of digital interaction to change the process through which we become subjects in the real/material world as well as online has major implications for the discussion of race. Digital performance projects that call us into being in ways that are alienating can facilitate an awareness of the codes embedded in the behavioral patterns that constitute our personal set points and which we often take for granted, giving us the opportunity to redefine racial communities by adopting different patterns of behavior.

With the unique advantages that digital media offer to ayo's project, her decision to publish *How to Rent a Negro*, and thereby shift the venue through which the satire functions, is in some ways surprising. The book serves as an extension, rather than a replacement, of the Web site. It includes samples of the completed rental request forms ayo has received electronically since the performance began, and lays bare the mechanisms of participation in the rental relationship by educating both renters and

⁵³ <http://www.echonyc.com/~confess/>. Accessed May 1, 2005. The interactive component of this site is no longer functional.

⁵⁴ Fifth International Conference on Cyberspace, <http://www.fundacion.telefonica.com/at/egomez.html>. Accessed May 1, 2005.

⁵⁵ Lisa M. Blackman, "Culture, Technology and Subjectivity: an 'ethical' analysis," in *The Virtual Embodied: Presence/Practice/Technology*, ed. John Wood (New York: Routledge, 1998), 142.

rentals in the behaviors that will ensure a productive professional encounter. However, the book itself does not demand externalized response in the way that the Web site does. There are questionnaires to be completed and templates to be used for forms and certificates, but the feedback loop of the project is disrupted in print, as it does not automatically return to the artist herself.

Nevertheless, the dialogue that ayo wishes to foster is taking place, and communities of conversation regarding practices of racial objectification are taking root, even online. However, it was the publication and sale of *How to Rent a Negro*, rather than rent-a-negro.com alone, which facilitated this. Whereas rent-a-negro.com offers people the opportunity to perform race satirically, there is no online community in which visitors may respond ethically and out of character to the issues ayo raises. Of all places, the site of self-reflection and interpersonal dialogue about the ideas contained in the concept of renting a Negro is the reader reviews section of the Amazon.com Web page for ayo's book. At the time of this writing, there are only a few reader reviews listed, but they already run the gamut from white liberal epiphanies about one's own lapses into objectification, to black empathy for the practices ayo condemns in the dominant culture, to the condemnation of ayo's (alleged) pessimistic assertion that true respect and communication across racial lines are impossible. ayo offers site visitors (and now, book readers) the opportunity to participate in satirical play, while Amazon hosts the discussion board where visitors may share their ethical responses to the project. Perhaps when taken together, the cultural and capitalistic work of damali ayo and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, respectively, do tend toward the infinite possibilities of identity by making productive use of the fragmented experience of racial meaning that postmodern life in general, and virtuality in particular, afford us.