

# Racism on Airbnb inspires new sites Innclusive and Noirbnb

July 21 2016, by Beth J. Harpaz

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This screenshot from a new website, Innclusive.com, shows the company's homepage. The founders of Innclusive.com started the vacation rentals website because of concerns about racism in the vacation rental industry, including travelers who said they'd experienced racism from Airbnb hosts. The founders have heard from many travelers and hosts who want to be involved with a vacation rental site that is committed to inclusivity. (Innclusive.com via AP)

Accusations that Airbnb has been ignoring complaints of racism have led several black entrepreneurs to create two new vacation rental websites where they say racism will not be tolerated.

The new sites, Innclusive.com and Noirbnb.com, say they are enrolling

hosts around the country and the world and hope to open their platforms for bookings toward the end of this summer.

The sites are launching after months of allegations from travelers who say they've been rejected by Airbnb hosts because they are black. Many have posted their experiences on Twitter with the hashtag #AirbnbWhileBlack.

Among the stories that have made headlines was Gregory Selden's. He was rejected for a stay in a property that later accepted him when he used a fake profile for a white man requesting the same dates. Selden has since filed suit against Airbnb. Another case got attention in June when Airbnb removed a host in North Carolina who purportedly used a racial slur to reject a booking by a black woman.

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## AIRBNB

Airbnb has a longstanding policy prohibiting discrimination, but back in January, a study by researchers from the Harvard Business School found that African-American guests were less likely to be approved for Airbnb bookings than white guests.

This week, Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky said in a statement published on Airbnb's blog that allegations of racism are "the greatest challenge we face as a company" and pledged to "create new tools" to prevent bias. A review of company practices is underway, headed by Laura Murphy, former head of the American Civil Liberties Union's legislative office. The company has also hired former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder as an adviser on the efforts.

Murphy said the company's findings and new policies will be made

public around Labor Day, and that they will focus on becoming more responsive to complaints, implementing anti-bias training and preventing discrimination in bookings. She could not provide details on how many complaints of racism have been received or how many hosts have been removed, but said they would "monitor the behavior of hosts to make sure that people acting in a discriminatory fashion aren't allowed to participate in our platform."

Asked why profile photos are required when so many people say they're being rejected based on their race, Airbnb spokeswoman Courtney O'Donnell said the photos "have been an important tool to help connect hosts and guests," as well as a security feature so users can recognize each other at check-in. But, she added, "we are reviewing every aspect of our platform, including the use of photos."

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## INNCLUSIVE.COM

Innclusive.com founder Rohan Gilkes' experience with Airbnb began when his attempts to book a property in Idaho on several different dates kept being rejected. He had a white friend book for the same dates and she was approved.

The experience led Gilkes, an entrepreneur who has built more than a half-dozen companies, to found Innclusive.com with Zakiyyah Myers.

"It really grew out of the lack of response I got from Airbnb," Gilkes said. "If their response had been a little more empathetic, or where I felt they were taking the problem seriously, I would be doing something else with my time."

Among Innclusive.com's innovations is a simple tech tool that prevents

hosts from seeing pictures of guests until after the booking has been approved. If the host cancels a booking after seeing the guest's photo, they will not be able to book the property for those dates with someone else.

Myers says all kinds of discrimination exist on sharing-economy websites. She's heard from gay travelers, Latinos, interracial couples and Muslims. "It's more than just an African-American issue, it's a human issue," she said.

Gilkes said he's been heartened by outreach from all races, including many white hosts and travelers. "They want to spend money and travel in ways that are aligned with their values," he said.

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## NOIRBNB.COM

Stefan Grant and Ronnia Cherry were renting an Airbnb house in Atlanta, where Grant was playing at a music festival, when neighbors called the cops. Police showed up with their guns drawn.

"They saw black people in the house and assumed we were robbing the place," Grant said. Airbnb gave them a voucher "to smooth things over," but Grant felt the company's response was "lackadaisical."

Grant says they pitched a proposal to Airbnb for a program to ensure that black travelers "had people in the company who cared about what they were doing," but nothing came of it. So Grant and Cherry started Noirbnb.com.

"We want to proactively create a culture where these things will not occur," said Cherry. "As a black-owned company, we want to create

something that everyone can use. If you're coming to a place like Noirbnb, it's such a multicultural platform, you'll not only see people of color but you'll also see people that respect people of color."

Among those glad to be partnering with Noirbnb is Ashley Warmington, who owns Cozy Oasis in Brooklyn, New York, a short-term rental concierge company that caters to hosts, guests and landlords. "The energy and focus in entrepreneurship pushes all of us to be better," she said. "I see that in Noirbnb."

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Citation: Racism on Airbnb inspires new sites Innclusive and Noirbnb (2016, July 21) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-07-racism-airbnb-sites-innclusive-noirbnb.html>

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