

The 10 biggest race and pop culture trends of 2006

by Carmen Van Kerckhove

From the neo-minstrelsy of Flavor of Love to the racial segregation on Survivor, from the race-swapping families on Black.White. to the fascination with interracial sex, from Gwen Stefani's use of Harajuku girls as mute human props to Angelina Jolie's obsession with international adoption, from Michael Richards' lynching tirade to Rosie O'Donnell's "ching chong" remarks, race and pop culture are colliding more now than ever before.

I've made it an annual tradition to break down the top trends in race and pop culture. As you'll see, I had plenty to write about for the year 2006.

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10. Race-swapping undercover experiments

TV during the first quarter of 2006 was all about undercover experiments, so much so that I actually wrote a post about it in late February. (And the queen of undercover experiments was undoubtedly Miss Tyra Banks.)

Not all of these experiments had to do with race:

- Tyra Banks goes undercover in a fatsuit to examine prejudice against overweight people

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- Beyond Diversity Buzzwords and Oppression Olympics: A New Framework for Discussing Race and Racism
- Not Just Fetishists and Race Traitors: Challenging the Ways We Look At Interracial Relationships
- Recognizing Racial Stereotypes and Their Impact on the Workplace
- Cute But Confused: Myths and Realities of Mixed Race Identity

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- Journalist Norah Vincent goes undercover as a man and writes the book *Self-Made Man : One Woman's Journey into Manhood and Back*
- Tyra Banks dons “trashy clothes, a latex nose and a wig to disguise herself as a sexy dancer and took a secret film crew into a strip club” to expose the “sleazy world of strippers and pole dancers.”

But a great many of them were all about race:

- The most notorious example was the reality series *Black.White.* on FX, in which a white family put on blackface and a black family put on whiteface to see what it was like living as a different “race.” As you can imagine, it was festival of racial stereotypes in which nobody learned anything constructive about anything.
- Tyra Banks sends a black woman (who on a previous show declared she hated black women) out in whiteface to try and get at “the root of her hate.” She also sent the black/white mixed writer Angela Nissel on dates “both as a black woman and as a white women to see if they treat her differently.”
- Even Oprah got in on the race-swapping fun when she entered “The Human Race Machine” to see “what she looks like white? Asian? Hispanic?” Ugh!

Sometimes the race-swapping wasn't done in an undercover fashion, but simply by putting a black person in a white community or a white person in a black community (because you know, those are the only two races that count on TV).

- Dr. Phil did a god-awful episode about race in which he forced a white racist to spend two whole days with a black family in an effort to “cure” him of his racism.
- *Trading Spouses* did an episode in which the Josephs (a black family from Harlem, NYC) and the Gibbons (a white family from Mendon, Massachusetts) swapped spouses.

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9. Hipster racism

This is a trend I noticed back in 2005, at the height of the Kill Whitey parties and Blackface Jesus . It was still going strong in 2006 and unfortunately, began spilling

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over into non-hipster demographics (as you'll see later on in the list).

- The hipster label of choice, American Apparel, continues to showcase exploit biracial and multiracial models in its quasi-pornographic ads, often explicitly spelling out their mixedness by listing out their ethnicities (e.g., “Meet Carrie, Chinese/British/Canadian”). The New York Times picked up on this in April, writing that founder “Charney embraced the notion of “real” advertising, photographing young ethnic and mixed-race men and women with asymmetrical features, imperfect bodies, blemished skin and visible sweat stains on the clothes they are modeling.”
- Sandra Bernhard appeared on The View in June and claimed responsibility for the success of Mariah Carey’s Emancipation of Mimi album. “Bernhard said it was her jokes eight years ago about Carey “being black only when it’s convenient” that led to the singer’s nervous breakdown, which eventually resulted in this current emancipation.”
- John Mayer, some of whose best friends are black (Kanye) if you didn’t know, for some inexplicable reason tried his hand at stand-up comedy in June and supposedly used the n-word multiple times on stage. There were conflicting accounts of what exactly went down though, see here for a different take.
- Gwen Stefani has been criticized by many thinking people, including Margaret Cho, for her using Asian women as living props who are contractually obligated to only speak Japanese even though they’re all American. In November she told Entertainment Weekly that Cho had it all wrong: “She didn’t do her research! The truth is that I basically was saying how great that culture is. It pisses me off that [Cho] would not do the research and then talk out like that. It’s just so embarrassing for her. The Harajuku Girls is an art project. It’s fun!” If that wasn’t rich enough, Stefani then explained how racist everybody else was! “Everybody’s making jokes about Japanese girls and the stereotypes. I had no idea [I’d be] walking into that.”

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8. The continuing obsession with interracial relationships

Mixed race identity may be so over, but interracial relationships are still a source of fascination. The hype train kicked off right at the beginning of the year with the release of *Something New*, the romantic comedy starring Sanaa Lathan and Simon Baker, in January.

- *Something New* prompted the publication of tons of articles like this one from The Washington Post, exploring interracial relationships (black/white only, of course) and the supposedly grim prospects for marriage of African-American women. It also inspired a pretty horrendous episode of Oprah organized along some of the most tired stereotypes out there: hair (why do black women stay in the hair salon for so many hours?), sex (once you go black, you never go back), dancing (guess who does it badly?), family differences (white people play bingo, black people play spades). Later in the year we also saw this stereotype-riddled article from Essence, leading me to write the blog post “Black women don’t give head, and other lessons learned from Essence.”
- We started seeing more and more interracial couples in TV commercials. Virgin Mobile ran an ad campaign around a character named Cindy Yu, whose parents are an Asian woman with a vaguely Chinese accent and a Ali G-style white man. Helio recreated a guess who’s coming to dinner scenario, with a white girl bringing her Asian boyfriend. Volkswagen did almost the same exact setup in their Jetta ad, only with an Asian woman bringing home her white boyfriend. And a Mastercard commercial featured a white man and Japanese(-American?) woman getting engaged, and meeting each other’s families.
- We saw dueling trends in the interracial marketplace. Many articles used *Something New*’s release as an excuse to publish fluffy trend pieces claiming that the biggest trend out there was black women deciding to date white men. ColorLines magazine though, claimed that the new trend was all about Asian women with black men. Then, following the release of the documentary *Heading South*, we heard that the real trend was all about white women engaging in sex tourism in “exotic” places like Haiti.

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7. The new minstrel show

North Carolina hip hop group Little Brother titled its late 2005 release *The Minstrel Show*, and they couldn't have been more prescient because minstrelsy made a huge comeback in 2006 in all forms of media: movies, television, music and even the internet.

- **Movies:** Tyler Perry made a killing by cashing in on the public's love for black men in dresses. *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* was nominated for an NAACP Image Award (yeah, I know) and its sequel, *Madea's Family Reunion*, opened No. 1 at the box office with \$30 million.
- **TV:** Flava Flav, the new millennium's Stepin Fetchit, ruled reality TV in 2006. The March finale of his VH1 show *Flavor of Love* drew 6 million viewers, making it the highest-rated show ever for the cable channel. And when the show returned in early August, 3 million people tuned in for the premiere. But *Flavor of Love* is just the tip of the iceberg in Viacom's not-so-classy depictions of black folks, as I outlined in this post. In November we heard a rumor that BET was going to start a reality show starring Bobby Brown and Karrine "Superhead" Steffans (author of *Confessions of a Video Vixen*). And TV commercials continued to rely on the archetype of the big black sassy mammy for humor.
- **Music:** Byron Crawford really nailed it when he wrote: "Flush with revenue from the likes of Mike Jones' *Who Is Mike Jones?*, the Ying Yang Twins' "Wait (The Whisper Song)," Three-Six Mafia's Academy Award-winning theme to *Hustle and Flow*, and D41's "Laffy Taffy," record labels are rushing out to sign the most coon-like negros they can find." Cases in point: DJ Webstar and Young B's *Chicken Noodle Soup*, Ms Peachez' *Fry That Chicken*, but perhaps the most egregious example is Jibbs' *Chain Hang Low*, which is set to an actual minstrel tune known as "Zip Coon" or "Turkey in the Straw." No subtlety there. And don't forget the ongoing tradition on *The Maury Show* known as the Not a Baby Daddy Dance. Of course, rapper NYOIL tried to address the minstrelsy problem in hip hop with his problematic and

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controversial video, Y'all Should All Get Lynched. See varying analyses of this video [here](#) and [here](#).

- **Internet:** Not content with minstrelsy on television, in movies and music, the same knucklehead who brought us the god-awful movie *Soul Plane* decided to launch a social networking site named CrackSpace, because “MySpace is great but it doesn’t even come close to fully satisfying the hip-hop generation.” Not to be outdone, some genius decided to take it a step further by launching NiggaSpace: “We just want to embrace the black culture that continues to innovate and strive!”

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6. Racism on college campuses

It seemed like a wave of racist incidents swept across college campuses all over the country in 2006. Just between October 1 and January 4 I bookmarked no less than 19 items relating to campus racism. Of course, it’s impossible to know whether racism is on the rise, or if we’re just hearing about it more often. Here are just some of the incidents we covered on Racialicious. See my [del.icio.us](#) page and this post from Rachel Sullivan for even more stories.

- The Duke Lacrosse rape case has turned into a total mess, but right from the get-go it shone a spotlight on the many dicey issues surrounding race and class on the Duke campus.
- Two white students at Colorado University sent a Latino student an email calling him a “river rat” and “border hopper” and “bean eating peace of (expletive).” The message suggested O’Neal would drag Castro behind his car, an apparent reference to the 1998 dragging death in Texas of James Byrd Jr., a black man.
- The Asian American Students Alliance at Yale University issued a formal complaint against student publication Rumpus for two supposedly satirical articles they ran chock-full of racist statements about Asian-Americans and interracial couples. Like this one: “Asian girls are like SARS — they take my breath away...”

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- One of Rice University's student papers, The Rice Thresher, ran a "humor" column which declared that Asian people's "eyes are so squinty that it is difficult for our friends from the Orient to see the page, so they must stare longer."
- The University of Michigan's College Republicans decided to plan a "Catch an Illegal Immigrant Day."
- A video surfaced made by two white Texas A&M students. One of them is in blackface, playing the role of the "slave" and is put through a mock whipping and sexual assault.
- I commended Whitman College for their reaction when photos were found of students putting on blackface at a party to mimic the racially segregated cast of "Survivor: Cook Islands." Instead of merely denouncing this act, Whitman College cancelled classes for an entire day and organized a full-day symposium on race relations which every single student had to attend.
- And of course, conservatives continued to the win the war against affirmative action. From Inside Higher Ed: "Michigan voters on Tuesday approved a ban on affirmative action at the state's public colleges and in government contracting. The vote came despite opposition to the ban from most academic and business leaders in the state — and the history in which the University of Michigan played a key role in preserving the right of colleges to consider race as a factor in admissions."

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5. Fear of a Latino takeover

Immigration reform was all over the news last year. And though it was rarely addressed openly, racism often reared its ugly head when it came to anti-immigrant sentiments.

- Jenn at Reappropriate summed it up nicely when she wrote "this is not a controversy about laws, about immigration, or about border security reform. This is a controversy about race. This is a controversy surrounding White nationals who insist that the American Dream should be reserved for their

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White bretheren who “deserve it” more.”

- Fox News openly called for white people to outbreed minorities. From Media Matters: “On the May 11 edition of Fox News’ The Big Story, host John Gibson advised viewers during the “My Word” segment of his program to “[d]o your duty. Make more babies.” He then cited a May 10 article, which reported that nearly half of all children under the age of five in the United States are minorities. Gibson added: “By far, the greatest number [of children under five] are Hispanic. You know what that means? Twenty-five years and the majority of the population is Hispanic.” Gibson later claimed: “To put it bluntly, we need more babies.” “
- The Los Angeles Times asked if New Orleans, with its influx of Latino immigrants, would become the new Los Angeles: “No matter what all the politicians and activists want, African Americans and impoverished white Cajuns will not be first in line to rebuild the Katrina-ravaged Gulf Coast and New Orleans. Latino immigrants, many of them undocumented, will. And when they’re done, they’re going to stay, making New Orleans look like Los Angeles.”
- The Alderman of Springfield, Tennessee proposed banning Latinos from the town’s public parks because they cause crowds on weekends: “When asked to comment on the possibility that not every Hispanic using the park was an ‘illegal immigrant’, Alderman Cherry responded, ‘If they’re speaking Spanish, I tend to think they are illegal.’”

From the absurd “I Am Africa” campaign to Kate Moss rocking blackface on the cover of The Independent’s Africa issue, from Bono’s (PRODUCT)RED campaign to Oprah’s \$40 million school for South African girls, from Angelina Jolie birthing Shiloh in Namibia to Madonna adopting baby David from Malawi, Africa was everywhere in 2006.

4. The return of the white man’s burden

From the absurd “I Am Africa” campaign to Kate Moss rocking blackface on the cover of The Independent’s Africa issue, from Bono’s (PRODUCT)RED campaign to Oprah’s \$40 million school for South African girls, from Angelina Jolie birthing Shiloh in Namibia to Madonna adopting baby David from Malawi, Africa was everywhere in 2006.

- Dr. Marc Lamont Hill did a great job explaining why all these campaigns

shouldn't be uncritically celebrated: "My worry, however, is that such acts are prompted by a paternalism (in Pitt's case, a literal one) that undermines African agency and prosperity. Instead of advocating the development of infra-structures for increased self-governance and self-reliance, these acts reinforce the dominant notion that Africa needs to be saved by White heroes. Additionally, much of the philanthropic work being done obscures more profound and causal structural factors such as globalization, neo-liberalism, and environmental racism."

- Richard Kim, writing for The Nation blog, suggested an alternative to buying one of the (PRODUCT)RED items: "Here's my DIY solution that still involves shopping and branding. A red Sharpie marker costs about a \$1. Go get one and mark up something you already own. A giant red A will suffice, I suppose, but don't be afraid to stretch your imagination. Then send \$198 (or \$149 or whatever you can afford) to the Global Fund."
- Adam Elkus drew a comparison between celebrity do-gooders and turn-of-the-century colonialist missionaries: "This brand of moral grandstanding suggests that Africa has become a kind of plaything for some campaigners, a backdrop against which they can make themselves feel good and 'special'. They are searching for personal meaning and purpose in the deserts and grasslands of Africa, not kickstarting a meaningful debate about how to take Africa forward. There is little new about this. The 19th century missionaries and explorers who established European control over the continent saw it as an exotic and forbidding land in which a similar kind of personal meaning could be found (or lost). The actual thoughts and desires of the inhabitants mattered little."
- Hannah Pool, herself adopted from an orphanage in Eritrea, also likened Madonna and co. with missionaries: "It's arrogant to assume the only way to deal with poverty in the developing world is for westerners to adopt a few "lucky" children. Adoption can be a wonderful thing, but when it comes to inter-country adoption it's easy to confuse what the parents want (a nice

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shiny, new baby) with what's best for the child. Inter-country adoption might seem well-intentioned but when white people from rich countries adopt black children from poor countries it smacks of missionary-like behaviour."

- With the Madonna adoption, we again saw people react to the complex issue of international and transracial adoption by saying things like "what, would you rather have the children die in orphanages?" I encouraged people to move beyond this simplistic either/or mindset by posing a series of questions that never seem to be addressed in media coverage of adoption: "Can a better standard of living, healthcare, education and loving adoptive parents ever make up for what is lost when a child is removed from his or her country and culture? Shouldn't every effort be made to try and keep families together? Shouldn't adoption be a final resort?"

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3. Colorface everywhere!

It seemed like blackface, brownface and yellowface was everywhere in 2006, even in the most unexpected places. Some of these blackface incidents we've already covered. For example, Kate Moss in blackface for The Independent's Africa issue, the many "ghetto parties" and blackface incidents included in racism on college campuses and the Tyra Banks Show episode where she had Angela Nissel go on dates with three men both as a black woman and as a white woman .

- Liberal blogs Firedoglake and Billmon (who has since stopped blogging) both decided to use blackface images to mock people they didn't like/respect. Firedoglake blacked up a photo of Joseph Lieberman in a post accusing him of race-baiting. Billmon blacked up a photo of CNN's Wolf Blitzer after he complained about Lynne Cheney being uncooperative during an interview. Both issued the standard "I'm sorry you're offended but I'm just so brave and un-PC" apologies, leading ebogjonson to create a flowchart for those bloggers asking themselves if they should use blackface on their blog. In case you were wondering, if you answer yes to being white, the answer is "STOP! You CANNOT use blackface EVER under any circumstances." Also, be sure to

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check out Kai Chang's series on racism in the liberal blogosphere.

- A movie based on the 1970s TV series "Kung Fu" is in the works. As you probably know, biracial Asian/white protagonist Kwai Chang Caine was played by David Carradine in the series. And he's been milking the virtual yellowface gig ever since, from his role in Kill Bill to his stupid Yellowbook.com commercials. The question is, which white guy are they going to get to play Kwai Chang Caine in the movie version? Who has enough "Asian flavor?" I'm putting my money on Steven Seagal. ;)
- Eddie Murphy will be engaging in some yellowface in his new film, Norbit. Jenn from Reappropriate summed it up thus: "In it, Murphy plays a dorky, meek Black man adopted as a child by an old Asian man and, in adulthood, who is dominated by a fat black woman stereotype. The catch? Murphy plays Norbit, Norbit's girlfriend, and the Asian man who adopts him. As the Asian man, not only does Murphy wear yellow-tinted skin, but plays up the old Asian male stereotype, complete with poor Chinglish accent."
- And of course, the most talked-about colorface incident of 2006 has been Angelina Jolie playing Mariane Pearl in the new film "A Mighty Heart." It's still unclear why they decided it was necessary to pile on the bronzer and wig when Mariane's race plays no role whatsoever in the film.

The Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was caught on tape debating the spiciness of Latinos: "I mean Cuban, Puerto Rican, they are all very hot...They have the, you know, part of the black blood in them and part of the Latino blood in them that together makes it".

2. Celebrity racial slurs

Making racist remarks in 2006 rivaled nipslips and pantylessness in its ability to garner press attention for celebrities and public figures.

- The Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was caught on tape debating the spiciness of Latinos: "I mean Cuban, Puerto Rican, they are all very hot...They have the, you know, part of the black blood in them and part of the Latino blood in them that together makes it". And of course, George Allen was caught on tape calling an Indian-American man a "macaca."
- Miss Jones, a DJ at New York hip hop station Hot 97, called New York City

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Transit Workers Union president Roger Toussaint a “dumb coconut who probably don’t even have a green card.” New York’s other big hip hop radio station Power 105’s DJ Star made all kinds of disgustingly racist and violent remarks about the wife and children of a rival DJ, threatening to “do an R. Kelly” on his daughter and calling his wife a “whore,” a “lo mein eater” and far worse anti-Asian slurs.

- Kanye West told Essence magazine that “If it wasn’t for race mixing, there’d be no video girls.” As if that wasn’t offensive enough, he went on to say: “Me and most of my friends like mutts a lot ... Yeah, in the hood they call ‘em mutts.”
- Michael Richards was caught on tape in a racist tirade at Los Angeles’s Laugh Factory, repeated calling a black heckler the n-word and saying: “Fifty years ago we’d have you upside down with a f***ing fork up your ass.” It was interesting to see how mainstream media outlets focused exclusively on Richards’ use of the n-word, when really the most offensive thing about the tirade was his overt reference to lynching.
- Rosie O’Donnell decided to mock Chinese people on The View with a long “ching chong” joke. The most depressing thing about this incident was how the Asian American community had to explain, and even prove, that yes, “ching chong” is indeed a racial slur and highly offensive. O’Donnell’s eventual non-apology was perhaps even more insulting than the original joke.

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1. Race baiting

It seems like ever since Crash won the Oscar for Best Film, everyone has felt like race is the best way to get attention for their projects. Unfortunately, people also felt like it was necessary to use race in the most exploitative ways possible.

- We’ve already discussed reality show Black.White, Tyra Banks’ sending biracial writer Angela Nissel on dates as a black woman or a white woman (as if she isn’t both anyway), Oprah’s voyage on The Human Race Machine, Dr. Phil’s “curing” of the racist white man, Trading Spouses’ race-swapping episode, and all the hoopla over interracial relationships as a result of the

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movie *Something New*. But that was just the beginning.

- Survivor played the ultimate race card when it announced that its idea of diversity was to have four racially segregated tribes: black, Hispanic, Asian and white. Jen and I went around doing our talking head thing, speaking out against this very bad idea. Jen also wondered, where would she and I end up if we were on this show? Would we have to double-team? Play for both the Asians and the whites? In the end though, something positive did come out of this whole ordeal. Yul Kwon won the competition, and we're excited to see what will come from this very politically-minded Asian-American man. Also, the next season of Survivor appears to have another very diverse cast because the powers-that-be apparently realized that America is willing to watch non-whites on TV too. Shocker!
- I'm always railing against oppression olympics - the way different communities compete with each other over who's more oppressed. But Tyra Banks apparently decided it would be a good idea to find out once and for all who has it the worst when it comes to racism and discrimination! The show was just as absurd as you'd imagine it would be. And if memory serves, the episode ended with audience members holding hands and swaying. Oh Tyra, she's such a healer.
- The dirtiest race-baiting tactics, however, were definitely found in the political sphere in 2006. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but just some of the incidents we covered on *Racialicious*. Florida congressional candidate Mark Flanagan aired a commercial promoting racial profiling and was quoted as saying "We're at war, and if we're going to win, we are going to have to abandon all political correctness." Illinois's Bob Flider went with a TV spot that had Indians and Chinese endorsing his opponent because he would outsource American jobs and benefit them. Minnesota's Jeff Johnson ran a commercial warning people against identity theft, and apparently decided that the big bad identity thief was an American Indian man. Anti-affirmative action activist Ward Connerly was caught on tape singing the praises of the KKK: "If

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the Ku Klux Klan thinks that equality is right, God bless them. Thank them for finally reaching the point where logic and reason are being applied instead of hate.” But Harold Ford Jr.’s bid for the Tennessee Senate was by far the most racialicious ride of all: from the kerfuffle surrounding his revelation that his grandmother was white, to the New York City public relations firm that called Ford a “Southern sellout” who had a severe case of “jungle fever,” from Corker darkening up a photo of Ford, to the now-infamous miscegenation TV spot.