Visualizing Elvis Lives: Assembling the Lives of Images

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Abstract

In this visual essay I attempt to assemble a (possible) network of intentionalities in which we are enmeshed by re-presenting the network ontology of the artwork (Forever Free) Elvis Lives! (1997) by Michael Ray Charles. As a network ontology, the visuals provided bring together both a network structure to the signification process that occurs when encountering an image and provide a visualization of the

intervisuality, network ontology, interpretation

substance of the world of visual culture in which we live. Historical reference, intertextual appropriation, and transmedia remixing are all modes of the interconnections that are presented so that interpretation of visual culture may articulate more of what is going on when we choose to look. The visual essay presents an extension to interpretive methods that may be used in arts learning to hone skills in close looking, invigorate notions of the image as a multiplicity, and pursue meaning-making visual culture within a network ontology.
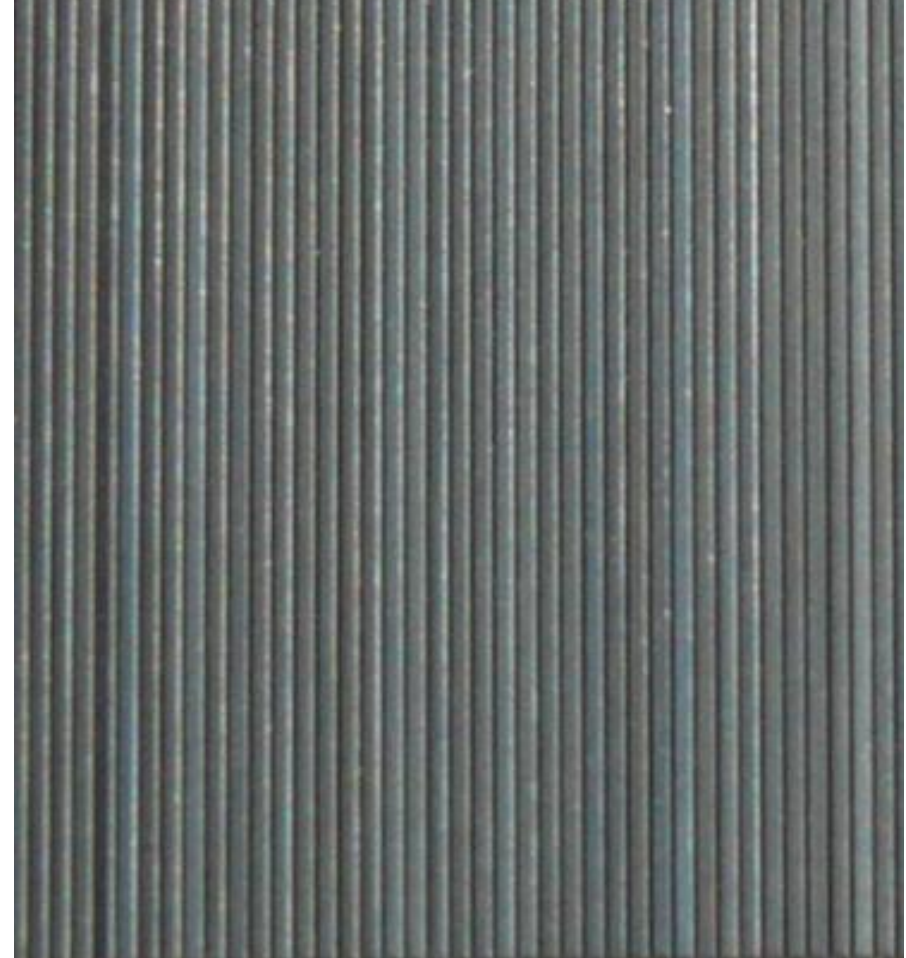
Visualizing Elvis Lives:

Assembling the Lives of Images

W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) once asked the provocative question, "What do pictures want?" Drawing from visual culture studies, Mitchell is aligning his inquiry with scholarship from film studies and psychoanalysis, whereby images hail us as interpolating subject/objects. Images call to us. They beckon us in ways that catalyze chains of signification, gaze back at us in ways that make us the object of sight/cite/site (jagodzinski, 2010), and involve us in a collective substance that constitutes our world. This substance, that of the ontology of visual culture, then acts on the world and us as agentic beings, forming and sculpting what we are and how we know what we are. Anthropologist Alfred Gell (1992) thought that art achieved this agency through a sort a technology of enchantment whereby the stylistic acuity of the artifact could, via abductive reasoning, enable the social collective to form. Gell states, "As a first approximation, we can suppose that the art-system contributes to securing the acquiescence of individuals in the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed" (p. 43).

While I disagree with the ways that Gell positions enchantment in relation to the efficacy of technical execution, I am very much interested in the agency of images (not just art) in relation to our enmeshing in the world. In this visual essay I attempt to assemble a (possible) network of intentionalities in which we are enmeshed by re-presenting the network ontology of the artwork (Forever Free) Elvis Lives! (1997) by Michael Ray Charles. The coupling of the terms "network" and "ontology" requires some explanation. The term network ontology focuses on a network as a structure to conceptualize the formations of our social world. While it directly alludes to the Internet as a technological network of great significance to contemporary culture, it is also a concept that can help us map our connectedness in the world with ideas and people (or our enmeshing as Gell might all it). On the other hand, ontology is a philosophical concept that focuses on the world of things, or objects, and "the conditions of possibility we live with" (Mol, 1999, p. 74-75). Therefore, the pairing of network, as an articulation of relation, and ontology, as being in the world, provides for art education a way of understanding the complexity of images in their network being as opposed to their singularity. Central to understanding the network ontology of images is to understand that you never just see one picture, but rather each picture becomes an infinite network of interconnected images. The concept of the network ontology should share a striking resemblance with concepts such as semiotics, poststructuralism, and visuality

in that it essentially forwards the concept of the image as being multiple.

> The ontology of this interconnected image is realized through both technological and non-technological networks.

The ontology of this interconnected image is realized through both technological and non-technological networks. Therefore, exploring the network ontology of an image may include large data sets of images in a technological network such as a photo sharing website, but it may also consider the curation of images within a museum space or the visual encounters that greet us walking down the street. The importance of the concept in impacting art education is to augment conceptions of images from singular, hermeneutic objects rich with meaning, to instead employing methods of interpretation in the network, as a sort of momentary assemblage of signification. Through the network ontology we understand, interpret and derive meaning from the image within a particular space and time of interconnection.

In what follows, I attempt to assemble a visual network diagram of Michael Ray Charles' painting through a series of accumulations. I have selected this particular painting and artist for two reasons: 1) I personally like his work and have had many engaging discussions with students concerning this particular painting, and 2) the painting itself signifies to me a certain time and place in the development of art education research. Terry Barrett (2003) utilized Charles' work to discuss strategies of interpreting visual culture using an analytic methodology from Roland Barthes (1967). The method focuses on analyzing denotation, sensory elements that may be observed in the image or artifact of visual culture, and connotation, the meaning of those observed denotations. While Barrett's contributions are notable in expanding a range of interpretive methods beyond the scope of art to include broader considerations within visual culture, over the years I have again and again observed this method fold in on itself. As soon as a denotation is observed it is enveloped in a signification chain of connotation that is followed by another connotation. These synaptic connections of meaning are unruly, oftentimes contradicting one another, and I always have that moment where my students and I, in observance of the method, are artificially separating denotation and connotation. Meaning gets messy quickly as ideas get attached to denoted observations, but then are attached through historical repetition, intertextual appropriation, and transmedia remixing. I do find that the method is excellent at training close looking habits important to arts learning and in constructing logical and measured arguments about what can be said and not said about what we see and do not see. However, as has happened many times with (Forever Free) Elvis Lives!, there just seems to be so much more going on.

The following is a demonstration of a possible extension to this method, one that strives more to assemble the network ontology of an intervisual experience and somehow get closer to all that is going on. It is a method that is much more concerned with visuality as "the visual construction of the social field" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 171, italics are Mitchell's) where meaning is derived from assembling interconnections as opposed to a connection (i.e. denotation connects to connotation). Even more significant is the possibility of an interpretive analytics in art education that begins to articulate what Nicolas Mirzoeff (2000/2006) called intervisuality or the flow of cultures beyond nation states that is characteristic of global markets. Contemporary flows of global markets create visual culture diasporas that require an analysis beyond that of evaluating "interlocking texts" to instead finding "interacting and interdependent modes of visuality" (p. 97).

The visual essay begins with seeing the artwork in the network: screenshots of Google image and web searches that begin to show possible structures of the network ontology. I then provide a slide that highlights certain prominent details of the painting that have, again and again, formed the substance of discussions about denotation and connotation that I have had with my students. The details are the stance of the main figure, the color scheme, the language and typeface "ELVIS LIVES!," the use of blackface on the depiction of Elvis, the appearance of white-gloved hands, and the characteristic signature of the artist Michael Ray Charles. Each of these details, with exception of the color scheme, is then taken up as an opportunity to assemble a visual construction or what I call a visual network diagram. A visual network diagram is intended to articulate the network ontology of the image. Each detail is considered in isolation and then the final slide brings together a totalizing visual network diagram.

Hopefully, the visual network diagram may get a little closer to what is going on in the lives of images.
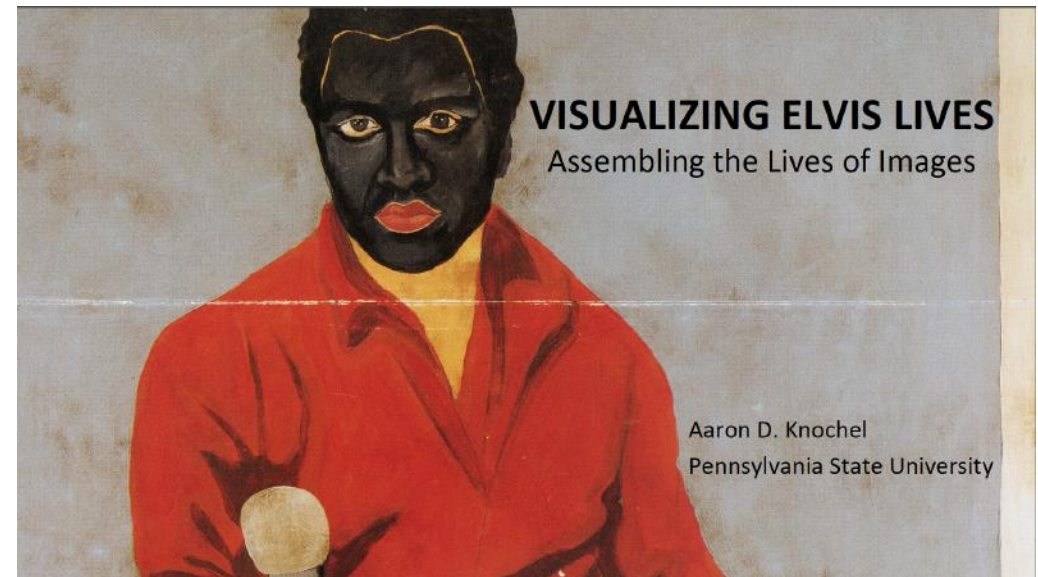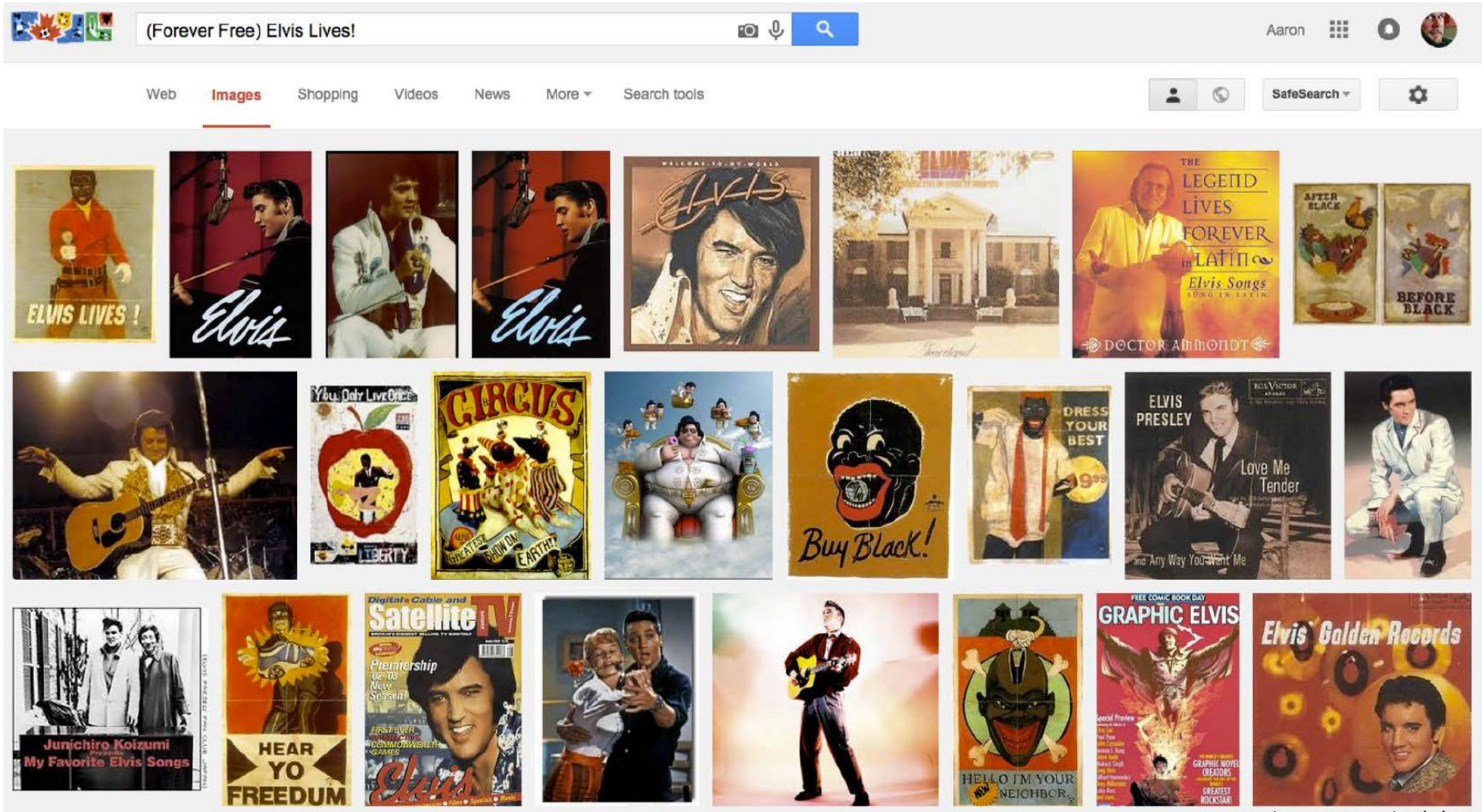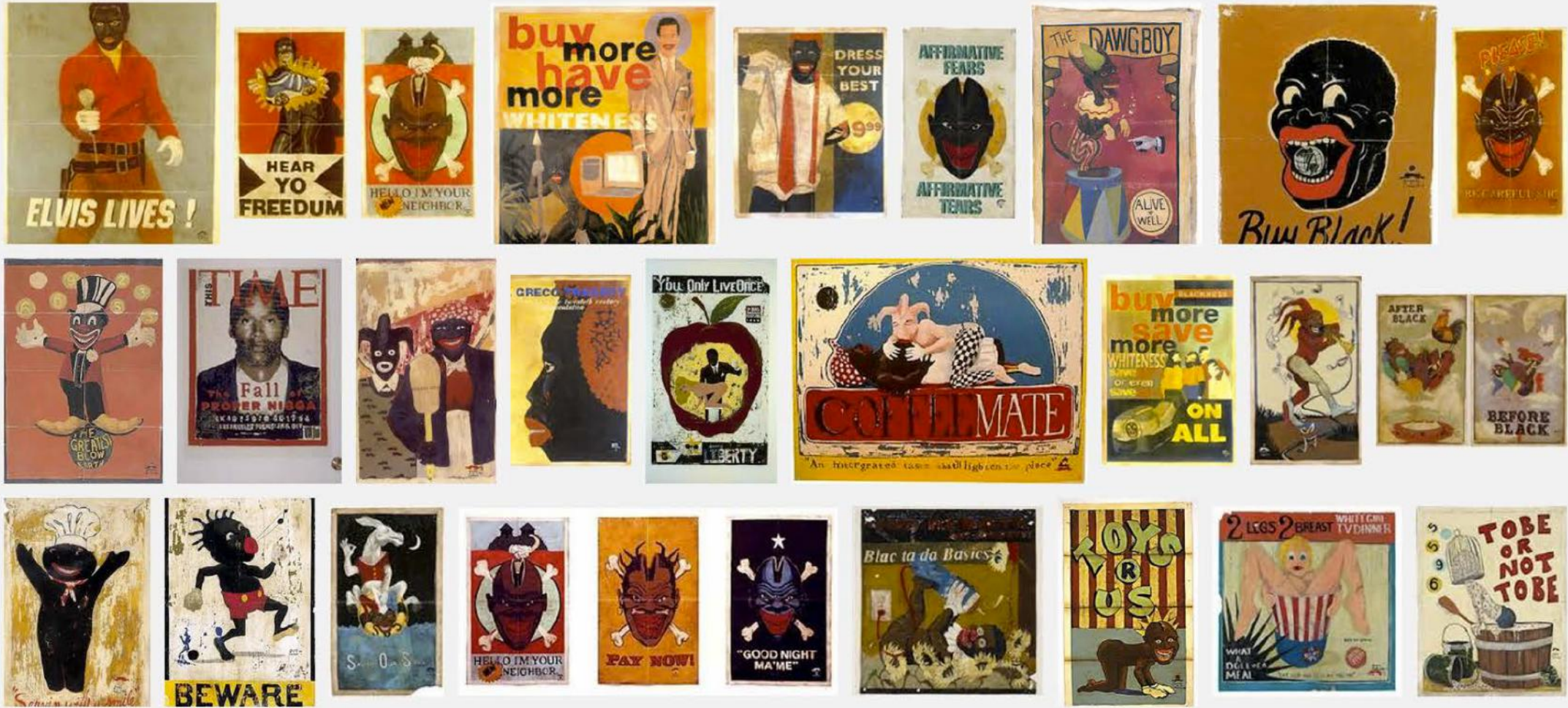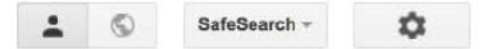
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Michael Ray Charles (born 1967) is an African-American painter born in Lafayette, Louisiana ... Michael Ray Charles, "(Forever Free) 'Servin with a smile'," 1994 ...

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388 × 480 - Xylophone, Art 21, Forever Free, American Art, Elvis Art, Ray Charles, Elvis Living, Black Art, Michael ... (Forever Free) Elvis Lives!, 1997 - Michael Ray Charles.

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160 × 198 - Michael Ray Charles, (Forever Free) Elvis Lives! Source: The Tony Shafrazi Gallery, Artcyclopedia.com, PBS, Ask Art and ... Tags: artists, Paintings. September ...

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388 × 480 - Michael Ray Charles Confronts Evolving Racial Stereotypes In His ... Art by Michael Ray Charles. Michael Ray Charles - Painting. Forever Free) Art n American" ...

Imprisonment on Pinterest | Bird Cages, Banksy and Devils ...
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388 × 480 - (Forever Free) Elvis Lives!, 1997 - Michael Ray Charles. Michael Ray ... Michael Ray Charles Confronts Evolving Racial Stereotypes In His Paintings. Michael ...

Michael Ray Charles | Sarah Kedzior
https://sarahkedzior.wordpress.com/.../michael-ray-charles-2/ ▾
388 × 480 - "A Little Southern Comfort" Born in Louisiana in 1967, Michael Ray Charles' art focuses on investigating the legacy of racial stereotypes. "I think these images ...

Gallery For > Michael Ray Charles Forever Free
imgarcade.com/1/michael-ray-charles-forever-free/ ▾
388 × 480 - Back > Gallery For > Michael Ray Charles Forever Free. Listing (16) Gallery Images For (Michael Ray Charles Forever Free).

kiss my black ads: Art by Michael Ray Charles
kissmyblackads.blogspot.com/.../art-by-michael-ray-charles.h... ▾
388 × 480 - Art by Michael Ray Charles. "You've got to think of how these images were used in American culture...they were everywhere and they were used to market ...

Elvis Art on Pinterest | Elvis Presley, Pop Art and Art Prints
https://www.pinterest.com/garymacdonald98/elvis-art/ ▾
236 × 291 - Elvis Presley [The one and only ELVIS PRESLEY] always and forever the KING More ..... Like. ftp.gac.edu. Michael Ray Charles / (Forever Free) Elvis Lives!

Independent Lens . RACE IS THE PLACE . Gallery | PBS
www.pbs.org/independentlens/raceistheplace/charles3.html ▾
311 × 372 - ... Andy Warhol screenprint: Elvis wearing blackface stands in a gunslinger pose. Michael Ray Charles Elvis Lives. Courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York.

ARTuesday: Michael Ray Charles & Andrea Zittel ...
advanceddigitalmedia3-4-2012-13.blogspot.com/.../artuesday... ▾
388 × 480 - Sep 4, 2012 - ARTuesday: Michael Ray Charles & Andrea Zittel. Visual and Performing Arts: Visual Arts Content Standards. 3.0 HISTORICAL AND ...

Photoshop: Josh Hagler and Michael Ray Charles
photoshop-haleigh.blogspot.com/.../josh-hagler-and-michael-... ▾
150 × 186 - Jan 11, 2011 - The KFC picture of Floyd Mayweather Jr. reminded me of the art that Michael Ray Charles created in order to show the stereotypical ways of the ...

ART 21 Artists | Casey Macko
https://caseymacko.wordpress.com/arte-344/art-21-artists/ ▾
388 × 480 - Michael Ray Charles has a bold painting style that attracts the eye of the viewer. His art is not only for galleries but he also has designed advertisements.

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mediaartsacademy1-2012-13.blogspot.com/.../artuesday-mic... ▾
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Photoshop: January 2011
photoshop-haleigh.blogspot.com/2011_01_01_archive.html ▾
150 × 186 - Jan 11, 2011 - The KFC picture of Floyd Mayweather Jr. reminded me of the art that Michael Ray Charles created in order to show the stereotypical ways of the ...

Teach Me To Create: September 2011
teachmetocreate.blogspot.com/2011_09_01_archive.html ▾
258 × 320 - Sep 21, 2011 - Michael Ray Charles. Layering: " Some artists pile images on top of each other, thus changing the meanings of the images in their original ...

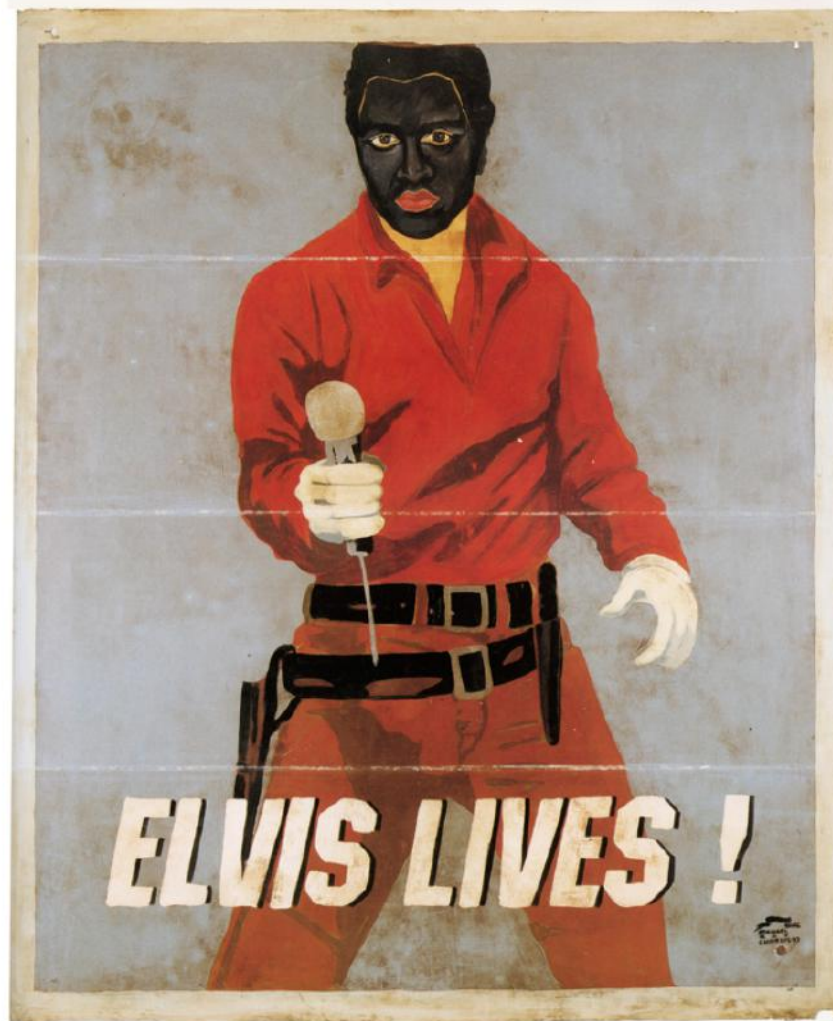**Teach Me To Create: Approaches to Postmodern Art-making**
teachmetocreate.blogspot.com/.../approaches-to-postmodern-... ▾
258 × 320 - Sep 21, 2011 - Michael Ray Charles. Layering: " Some artists pile images on top of each other, thus changing the meanings of the images in their original ...
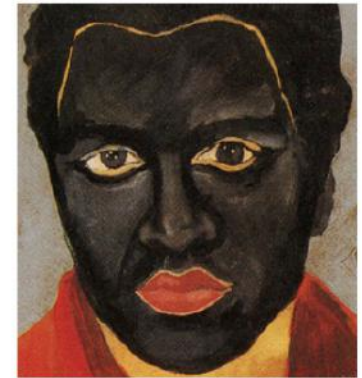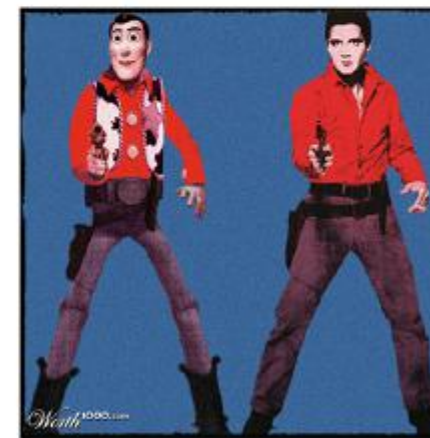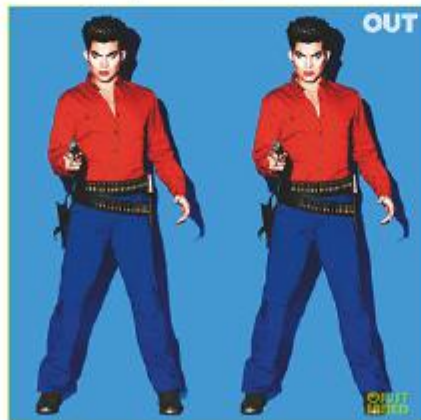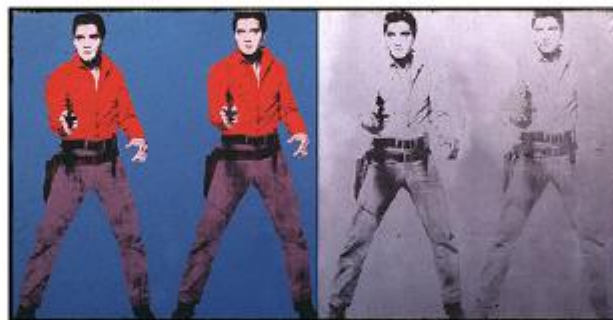
Google search using jpg 6/1/2[...]

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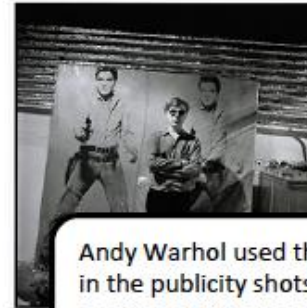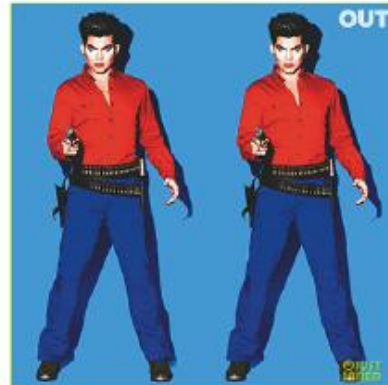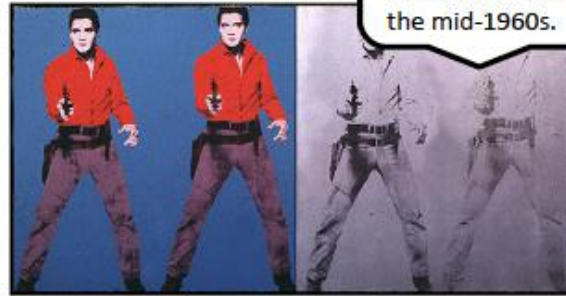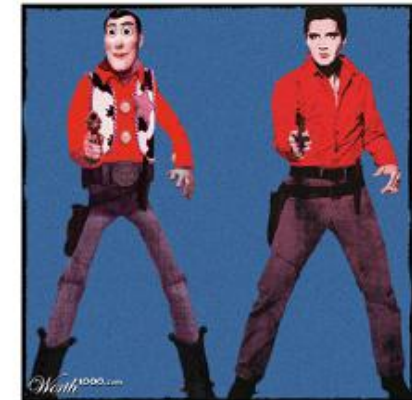Michael Ray Charles, *(Forever Free) Elvis Lives!*, 1997

Elvis Presley starred in a movie called *Flaming Star* (1960) where he plays a "half breed" rancher.

Andy Warhol used the stance in the publicity shots to create a series of silkscreens of Elvis in the mid-1960s.

The Elvis stance continues to be appropriated in popular culture.

Blackface continues to emerge as a cultural signifier in relation to whiteface and video game representations of race.

Blackface is a stereotype utilized in visual culture of popular entertainment and advertising throughout much of the 19th and 20th century.

Blackface continues to be a part of contemporary visual culture through fashion, university student parties, television, and holiday celebrations.
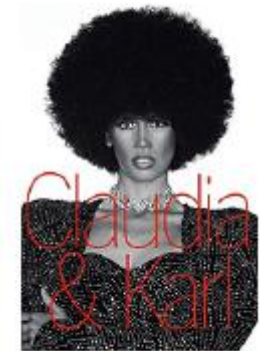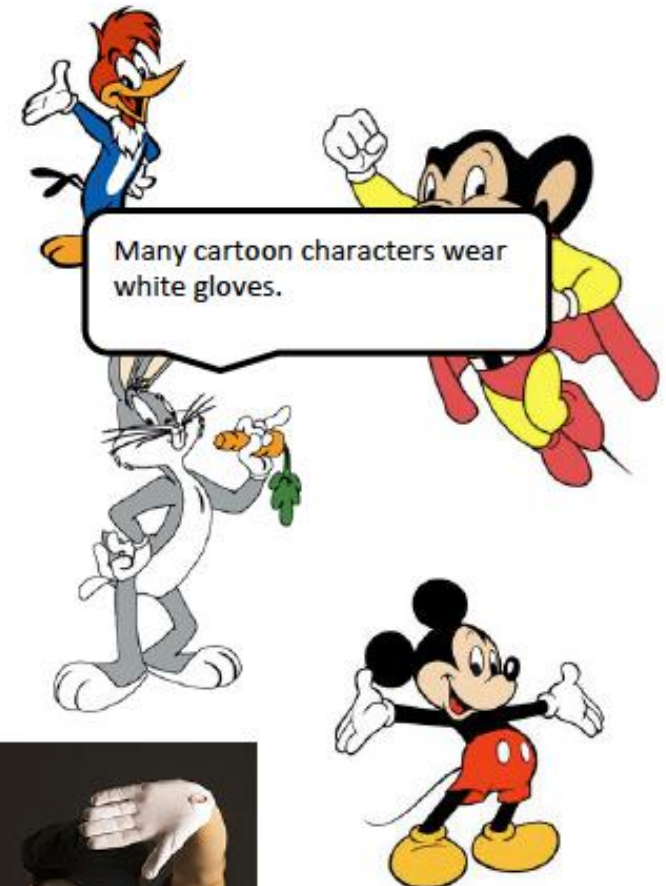
White gloves have many different cultural references from service labor, magicians, pop music, and debutante culture.

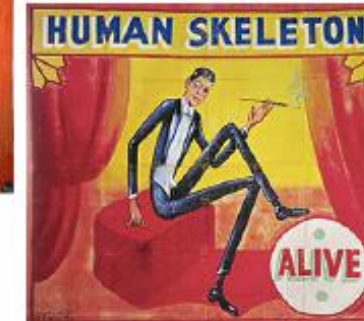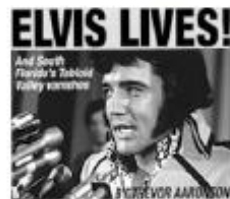Many cartoon characters wear white gloves.

FRESH OYSTERS

ELVIS LIVES !

BLOCKHEAD
ALIVE

AMAZON SNAKE CHARMER
ALIVE

ELVIS LIVES
THE ULTIMATE ELVIS TRIBUTE ARTIST EVENT

Farmland HOT DOGS 79¢
Jumbo Yellow ONIONS 19¢

GIRL TO GORILLA

FOLIES-BERGÈRE
LE KANGOUROU BOXEUR
LE PLUS NOUVEAU SPECTACLE

SADIE
ALIVE

A COMMUNSIT DOCTOR GOT ME FOR 125 DOLLARS B.4 I HAD SENSE ENOUGH TO QUIT A LAWYER GOT ME FOR SIG O AND QUIT ANOTHER LAWYER GOT ME FOR $250 BUCKS A CLIRK GOT ME FOR $50 BUCKS A SHERIFF TRIED TO GET ME FOR $150 BUCKS BUT HE DIDN'T GET THE JOB DON

NOVELTIES

NOT SURE IF ANGRY OR JUST ALL CAPS TEXT

THE MERMAID

TATTOOED GIRL
ALIVE

HUMAN SKELETON
ALIVE

SYLVIA BIG FOOTED GIRL
ALIVE

ELVIS LIVES!

Capita letters, an th overall styl o th painting, reference th histor of roadsid attractio posters fro earl 20th century America.
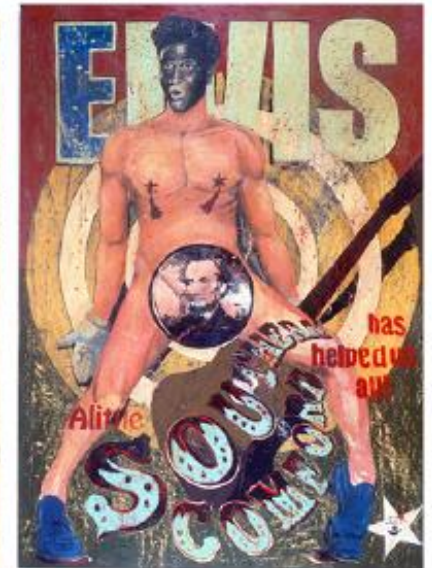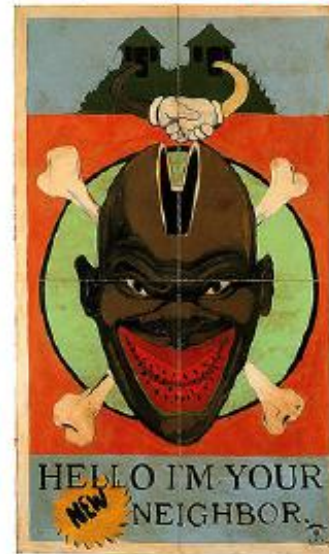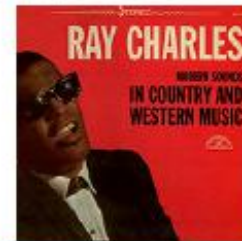
Capita letter hav many referent fro roa sign to meme tha expres emphasis o anger.

Not onl i "ELVI LIVES an anagram, bu i make multiple reference t tabloi headlines, reenactmen performances, and th persistenc o cultural norm associate wit Elvi .

Terr Barre (2003 use Charles' work, in particula *Cu an Paste* (1994), t discuss th strateg o interpretin visua culture utilizin connotatio an denotation.

Charle use penn i hi signatur and ha bee widel recognize fo being feature i th televisio sho *Ar 21*. Ther ar als association wit th famous musicia Ra Charle du t thei names.

Michae Ra Charle ha man work i the *Forever Free* series included here:
(Forever Free) Servin wit Smile 1994
(Forever Free) Bu Black! 1996
(Forever Free) Hello I'm You New Neighbor 1997
(Forever Free) Tomm Hilnigguh 1999
(Forever Free) Ar American, 2000
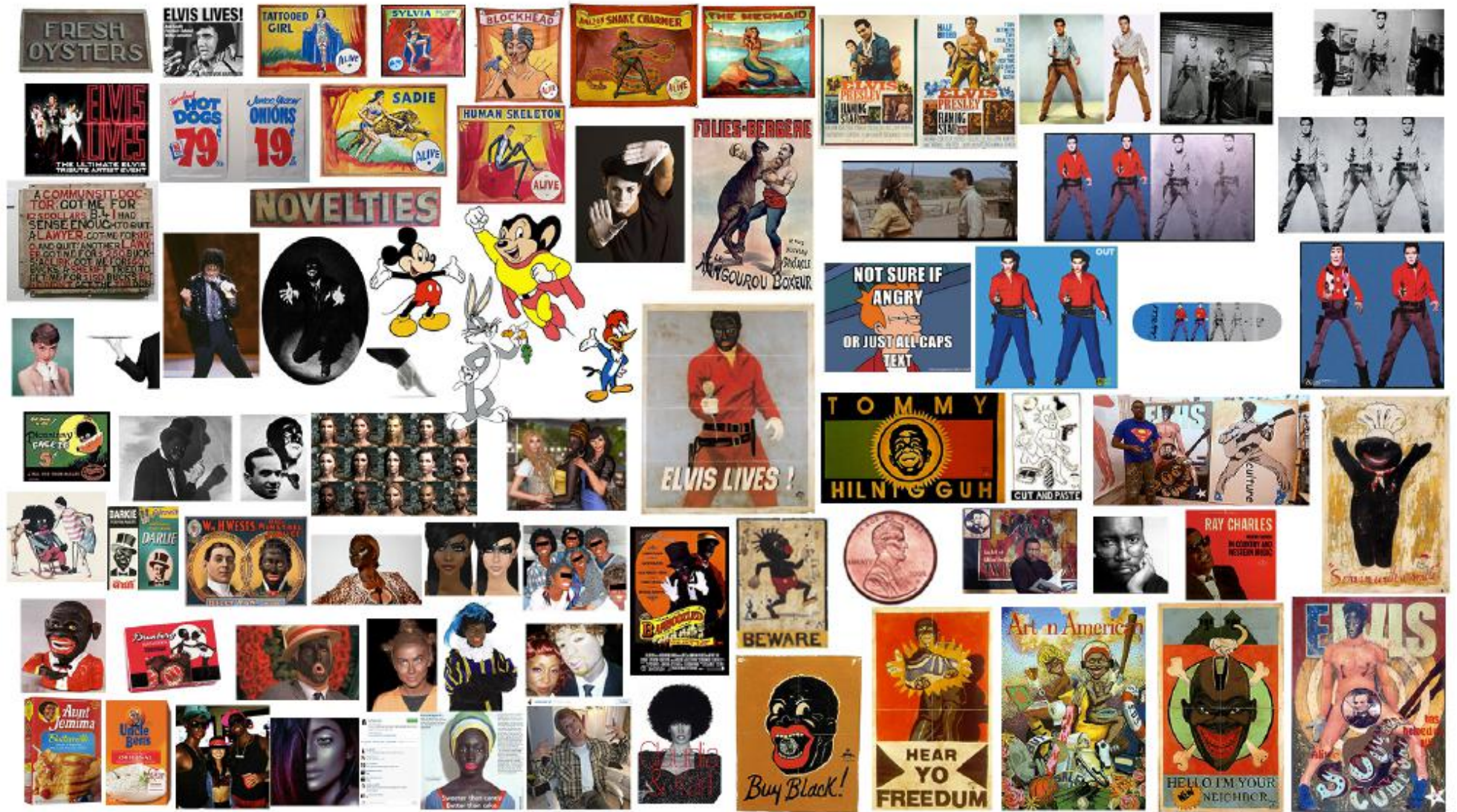
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