Emic and Etic Perspectives
in Contemporary American Art:

The Paintings of Michael Ray Charles

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Many the works of Michael Ray Charles are gripping, overtly disgusting, and infuriatingly racist. Yet, the artist would be the first person to tell you that that is the point. In fact, the works of Michael Ray Charles hit such a chord within the dialogue about race, advertising, American history, and stereotypes, that without an understanding of the psychological and emotional interaction within the content of the work, one may be left ashamed when viewing his paintings. For many, what they see seems hurtful and even offensive; so why does Michael Ray Charles continue to poke at these loaded images? The reason, I would suggest, is that without the provocative imagery, the lessons of the past will not be learned. In order to undertake a true and thoughtful engagement with the work, one is required to confront a multitude of influences, including those related to race, history, symbolism, advertising, American idealism, semiotics, and even the theoretical notions of painting and of art. Looking at Charles' work it is difficult—the viewer is compelled to both look and look away. So, why do we continue to look and why does the content of Charles' work continue to make us upset? I suggest that these questions lie in a much larger discussion on the way we look at art objects, and even the way we collect information about our own culture.

Two terms coined by the linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike in his 1954 book *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* have illuminating effects on the way we look at artworks that reference culture—including those made by Michael Ray Charles. Using the idea of the emic and etic processes as a basis, I will delve into the various relationships Charles forges, in order to better understand all the possible connections that underlie his work.

The terms emic and etic were first used by linguists to suggest a mechanism in which to study the forms of speech within a culture. The reason for the distinction between emic and etic rests in the way we collect data, isolating certain procedures prevalent within a cultural behaviorism. Kenneth Pike used the term emic to mean those sounds that are developed out of a specific culture and are shared equally by that culture. James Lett describes the emic as being directly meaningful to the members of a given culture.

> The perspective focuses on the intrinsic cultural distinctions that are meaningful to the members of a given society…in the same way that phonemic analysis focuses on the intrinsic phonological distinctions that are meaningful to speakers of a given language (e.g., Whether the phones /b/ and /v/ make a contract in meaning in a minimal pair in the language.) The native members of a culture are the sole judges of the validity of the emic description, just as the native speakers of a language are the sole judges of the accuracy of a phonmeic identification.[1]

Not only is the emic perspective meaningful to the investigated culture, the emic research relies on that culture to participate. This participation is crucial to Charles' work for if one agreed to not give the images sufficient time or energy the images would fail. The terms emic and etic, which were coined by Pike in his study on linguistics. have been applied (sometimes indiscriminately and incorrectly) to a host of disciplines since their introduction to anthropology. While these terms offer insights on the way one can approach collecting subject data, it has theoretical and practical applications that can be beneficial to a host of research methods. Yet, with the reaches into other disciplines, anthropologists believe that these terms have become confused and misinterpreted. Thomas N. Headland suggests, in his introductory chapter to a collection of articles on

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[1] James Lett. "Emic/Etic Distinctions" (Online Personal Home Page)

etic and emic, that these terms have reached far into other disciplines and have become

much more then Pike could have ever anticipated: "various uses of the terms may be fond

in journals of psychology, psychiatry, sociology, folklore, semiotics, philology, medicine,

nursing, public health, education, urban studies, and management."[2] While the list of

disciplines that appropriate emic and etic for their own uses persists, even into the visual

arts, Pike's own philosophy continues to be met with another set of ideas about the same

two words.

   After Pike published his book in 1954, the cultural anthropologist Marvin Harris,

repudiated Pike's definition of the two terms with his own application of what process

emic and etic research follows. Though both Pike and Harris' engagement are paramount

to the advancement of contemporary anthropology Headland believe the two separate at

Pike's emphasis on language and Harris' emphasis on culture. "Pike's tagmemics was

developed in the 1950's as a way of analyzing human language: Harris's cultural

materialism was developed in the 1960's as a way of understanding and interpreting

human culture."[3]

   Born in 1967 in Lafayette, Louisiana-- one year before the assassination of Martin

Luther King, 4 years after the church burning of 4 young girls in Birmingham', Alabama,

and less than 2 years after the Edmund Pettus Bridge march when armed police attacked

a crowd of civil rights demonstrators-- Michael Ray Charles grew up familiar with the

divides between white and black. Much of America was, at the time of Charles' early

life, just acknowledging the racial structures that kept a thriving community from being

treated equally and fairly. The civil rights movement was in full force by the time

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[2] Thomas Headland. *Emics and Etics: The Insider'Outdiser Debate. (*Sage 1990): 5
[3] Ibid 2

Charles could walk, being covered through all the national news media in newspapera, radio, and television. The old and new concepts of race were colliding headstrong and in the south, where Charles called home, these notions were instilled deep. Not only did one witness the events taking place on the streets and in the median between white and black, the black man was for some, nothing more than a caricature, to be stereotyped and exploited as a commodity. In fact, in 1933 article titled *On Jazz,* Theodor Adonor critiques jazz music as being confined to production, to making money, and it was the black performer who was being used for the color of his skin to sell jazz to mass culture. He makes this evidently clear when he says, "the skin of the black man functions as much as a coloristic effect as does the silver of the saxophone."[4] What is important to understand about Adorno and his argument is that he was at that time proposing that the black performer-- the jazz performer-- was nothing more than a gimmick to sale a show, and thus the art form itself recalled low culture, not the avant-garde notion of "proper" art and music. Adorno's views, while extremely racist, I think get to the heart of Charles' work. When he displays a black man, sometimes making connections to the black performer, what comes across is a gut-wrenching document on our past and present concepts on stereotypes.

Stereotyping race has always been a way to set divides, often signaling a certain caricature of a person. Stereotyping never essentially reveals the true nature of anyone but only alludes to a general composite of what one group thinks of another. Stereotypes have been around for as long as we can follow culture through documents. Placing a character in order to lessen their identity and strength is one of our great evils. It has

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[4] Theodor Adorno. "On Jazz." (Discourse 12:1): 47

brought great tribulations in the world and is used in a multitude of ways. Yet, the

caricatures of black Americans have been here since the beginnings of the nation's

history. "Stereotypes of blacks in America have existed since the arrival of the first

slaves. Stereotypes were used to control and enslave. The captured Africans were

depicted as dangerous and violent pagans who needed their masters to take care of

them."[5] Images used for stereotyping continue because there is truly no one to blame,

and at the same time we do have a recognition that the blame resides in the people who

continue the stereotyping. This very position has brought much criticism to Charles'

work, especially from the black community. Many feel that what Charles is doing is

perpetuating the same stereotypes that he says he is trying to fight against, and in fact if

he really wanted to stop this kind of connection, or disconnection, between races he

should find a different subject. Charles, on the other hand, does not see it this way. He

thinks that while the images are negative he is trying to suggest that we still have not

learned our lesson. "They are about the negative stereotypes that African-Americans still

buy into -- the minstrel and the mammy -- and how they update them, hide behind them.

They are about the racial stereotypes that white people created and perpetuate still, rather

than acknowledging African-Americans as complex and individual human beings."[6]

Michael Harris suggests that Charles' thinks of his works as positive, not at all

negative. That by looking at the work one is left with a better position than when they

approached the work:

[5] Michael Ray Charles. 1989-1997 Michael Ray Charles An American Artist's Work
      (Blaffer Art Gallery, University of Houston; Pmplt edition 1997): 8

[6] Rebecca Cohen. Painting Race: Getting Inside Michael Ray Charles' Provocative
Images. (The Austin Chronicle. October 24th, 1997)

Charles says that he is 'talking about the stereotypes and they are negative but yet positive…' he says 'I really don't think I'm dealing with the negative at all. I know I'm dealing with an aspect of it…I know according to the norm I'm dealing with negative images and I acknowledge that aspect about my work, But I really think I'm dealing with the positive aspect…I think the whole black experience has become a caricature sort of images.[7]

So, what is Charles really trying to do in his work? Harris suggests that Charles is trying to turn the table in on the viewer, to isolate the viewer into the realization that what they are looking at is of their own doing. This, I believe, is the essential place Charles wishes us to be. He wants us to be confronted with what is wrong with the painting, picking out parts that just seem way too much for us to deal with. That is the point. Harris suggests that in what Charles is dealing with are the multiple levels of our stereotypes; our caricatures that are so revealed they are hurtful.

He [Charles] attempts to take an object of ridicule and turn it backward into a critique of those who might create or continue to accept such caricatures. In some works he seems to criticize blacks who act out the stereotypes. The works take on the appearance of minstrel or circus posters and locate themselves in the world of odd and strange entertainments where difference is the attraction[8]

"Difference is the attraction." The performer becomes central to Charles' work, as it has been seminal to the way we associate ourselves to black culture. Like Charles' depictions of the athlete, the mass media sees African Americans as sports icons, seeking out the athletes who are both talented and can be used as a symbol for commercialism. Once again this recalls Adorno and his critique on jazz. What Charles deals with goes even further-- images that speak of America's Sambo. Images of Sambo reflect the oftentimes stereotypical clumsy, devious black child who knows nothing but trouble and tricky has been used in America for generations, even showing up in advertisement today. The Sambo image is now loaded with symbolism, as is the Mammy image we see

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[7] Michael Harris. *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representations*. (The University of North Carolina Press. Chapel Hill 2003): 192

[8] Ibid 193

with Aunt Jemima. These images are now engrained into our daily lives, and have at the same time become artistic and sociopolitical ammunition to be used against us. But, Charles also uses that against us too, suggesting that what we are looking at is or our own doing. Yet, do we seek out the question in order to cover this one reference? I think the references have too much depth for a quick glance, and are so complex that one needs to be an insider and at the same time an outsider to understand what is going on.:

> Charles has taken an old pickaninny/Sambo image and created a multilayered reference to the old carnival posters, as well as to posters for outlaws, and obliquely, runaway slave adds…The references are ironic, satirical, and critical[9]

So, how do we look at Charles' paintings? Could we ever be an outsider or an insider to the crisis he proposes in the work? I think that part of the appeal of Charles' paintings are that we can come to them knowing that they are foreign and at the same time built out of our own experiences and language. The works are both emic and etic. They ask the viewer to be aware of their own creation and to look past that creation, to seek higher plains in order to see the light. What Charles gives us is the contradictions in his work. Yet, these contradictions are what further drives Charles work into debate:

> There are contradictions in Charles's statements, and the differing reaction to his work by different audiences suggest something about the effect and effectiveness of the work. Charles says that his grand design is [AS AN INSIDER?] to 'document the African American Experience...' Though the artist believes his to be rooted in the black experience and in black history, he acknowledges that 'Whites generally accept the work from the beginning. Blacks have a hard time with it...' If we accept the premise that black stereotypes are based in white fantasy projected onto blacks, then we can argue that Charles is playing with and complicating history and images rooted in non-black culture. He is documenting an outside *perception* of the black experience, not the experience itself. His intention is to destabilize the images and turn them into a critique of the persistence of stereotypes as well as a celebration of black progress[10]

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[9] Michael Harris. *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representations*. (The
    University of North Carolina Press. Chapel Hill 2003): 192
[10] Ibid: 194

That debate between the outsider and the insider reveals how we might have the ability to view his works, and to be able to walk away from his paintings with more knowledge about what to do next. If you are a part of the black community, the outside perception of the black experience is an etic perspective while to be a part of the black community one might have an emic perspective that allow certain knowledge. Charles believes that there is a separation between what the white culture brings to his work as compared to the black viewer. He thinks that the white viewer is much more allowing of the images compared to the black viewer. "'White generally accept the work from the beginning. Blacks have a hard time with it…The work is meant for a white audience and it is from that audience's approval that the artist seeks his own validation. He privileges the positive reception of his works by whites—who obviously are not offended by the critical commentary"[11] What I would like to suggest that Charles' painting go much farther than an outsider/ white and the insider/black experience. I think we all have a say so in the creation of Charles' subjects, that we are all partly emic and etic when it comes to these images.

What is important to realize in this case is the power the viewer holds when he or she enters the paintings. H. Samy Alim comments on this with an article on the emic response to Hip Hop music. In this article Alim suggests that what is important is what the participating cultures brings with participation. Alim goes on to suggest the differences between emic and etic might lie in the role participation:

> The etic view establishes what's important, from the outsider's perspective, and begins with already formulated notions and categories of knowledge with which

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[11] Michael Harris. *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representations*. (The University of North Carolina Press. Chapel Hill 2003):194

to interpret the cultural phenomena in question. The emic view is the grassroots perspective. In other words, predetermined categories are thrown out in favor of an analysis that emerges from the insider's perspective. The researcher does not determines what's relevant; rather, the research must rely on the participants of the culture. This ensures that the analysis will be relevant to the community under study. [12]

While emic relies on the participation of a group of people and is the creation of that group, etic is conceptually linked to the viewer who watches, looking in on a group of people from the outside. One of the main differences between Kenneth Pike and Marvin Harris is that Pike believes that emic and etic were reliant on each other while Harris believed one could deal with the etic in and of it's own situation. Pike suggests that when he was thinking of these terms at first he wanted to make them dependent on each other. "Thus, for me, etic universal background pattern and emic culturally specific pattern were always intertwined and thus could not be treated separately, or first one, then the other, or as one as outside the mind, the other inside it. I wanted a holistic view from the beginning."[13] This distinction has proved to be a heated conversation between Pike and Harris, but it also mimics a debate in the arts between avant-garde and kitsch. The modernists formulation of avant-garde and kitsch by art critic Clement Greenberg, and music critic Theodor Adorno, asked for a separation between mass culture and the upper class in order to create a group of people who would support a higher, more refined, type of art. "Now, when it happens that a single art is given the dominant role, it become the prototype of all art: the others try to shed their proper characters and imitate its

[12] H. Samy Alim. "'The Natti Ain't No Punk City':Emic Views of Hip Hop Cultures" Callaloo, (29. 3. The Johns Hopkins University Press 2006): 970
[13] Alan Kaye. "An Interview With Kenneth Pike." (Current Anthropology, 35.3 The

effects."[14] This modernist call-to-arms would compel the avant-garde the responsibility for pushing a high aesthetic further this larger dialectic paved the way for further. What is important to understand about the modernist aesthetic, especially within the parameters which Adorno and Greenberg would erect, would be a type of control over art through the process of not being a part of the culture-- of being an outsider. This way, it seemed more constructive to critique and to direct if the person doing so was not persuaded by the aesthetics of the culture itself. What modernism wanted was for external control.

While Harris called for the etic to be loosened in its relationship to the emic, Pike's original definition suggests that the external was a way of getting to the internal and in fact that the external etic relied also on participation. James Lett suggests that those who are in charge of looking in on the group under surveillance are the ones who are able to prescribe meaning to the larger picture happening within that specific group. "The etic perspective, again according to Pike, relies upon the extrinsic concepts and categories that have meaning for scientific observers…in the same way that phonetic analysis relies upon the extrinsic concepts and categories that are meaningful to linguistic analysts. Scientists are the sole judges of the validity of an etic account, just as linguists are the sole judges of the accuracy of a phonetic transcription."[15] What I would like to suggest, in its relationship to the work of Michael Ray Charles, is that the viewer becomes both participants of the emic and etic perspective-- that, like Pike suggests, one cannot be removed from the other.

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[14] John O'Brian. *The Collected Essays and Criticism, by Clement Greenberg: Volume I: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944.* (The University of Chicago Press. 1988): 25

[15] James Lett. "Emic/Etic Distinctions" (Online Personal Home Page)

One of the most significant debates concerning art in the 20th century derives from the way we look at a piece of art, may it be a painting, a sculpture, a musical composition, etc. The heated conversations about art and aesthetics, in large part, began with the same principles I have mentioned above-- the dialogue between Adorno and Greenberg on art and culture. While Theodor Adorno commented on the proper ways of looking at music, favoring Schoenberg and rejecting jazz, Greenberg was establishing a way at looking at art. Greenberg's formalism, which started in the late 1930 with his seminal essay titled *Avante-Garde and Kitsch*, produced the building blocks of the visual documentation of works of art, especially giving paint the power to reference itself instead of being a mechanism to produce effects that are external to the substance of paint. This moment in the history of art where the art object is in a dialectical conversation with its objectness and content is called Modernism. Greenberg built his argument out of the way the picture, the painting in most cases, presented itself to the viewer. For most of art history painting was a way of showing illusion, the presence of imitation that is taken from objects seen in everyday life and subverted onto the picture's flat surface as a copy of the original. This illusion did not allow paint the ability to be discussed formally, as a form in and of itself. Illusion, on the other hand relied on the viewer's attachment to the object represented. Modernism was a way of self criticizing the old notions of the image before the viewer, what we can say is the emic/content versus the etic/form acknowledgment of the image. "Realistic, Illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art…It is not in principle that Modernist painting in its latest phase has abandoned the representation of recognizable objects. What has abandoned in principle is the

representation of the kind of space that recognizable, three-dimensional objects can inhabit."[16] Michael Fried continued Greenberg's Formalism with an attach on the "presentness" of the artwork, calling the 1960's Minimalism sculpture as theatrical because it called into question the object's need for viewer participation. Fried believed that the artwork created by Minimalist artist to be less dialectical because it asked for a dialog between viewer and object. Borrowing a word from Greenberg, Fried called these works of art that asked for viewer participation as "literalist." "The presence of literals art, which Greenberg was the first to analyze, is basically a theatrical effect of quality—a kind of stage presence. It is a function, not just of the obtrusiveness and, often even aggressiveness of literalists works, but of the special complicity that the work extorts from the beholder."[17]

While both Greenberg and Fried proposed an aesthetic that upheld the form of the work of art first and foremost what is important to realize is that they were in face calling for the work of art to be loosened from it emic content, like Harris, to seek the form of an object as it sole identifier. What does this large, now loaded and outdated debate between form and content have to do with Michael Ray Charles? I believe it has everything to do with Charles' work. First, since the medium Charles used to produce his images are in the painting tradition, he must be aware of the form/content conversation. I think that instead of asking the viewer to make a distinction between the form of the painting and the content of the painting, he is essentially asking us to associate the

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[16] Clement Greenberg. Modernist Paintings, 1960 Forum Lectures, (Poi in Art & Literature, 4, Spring 1965): 194-195
[17] Anne Wagner. Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology. (University of California Press. 1995): 127

content through the form and vice versa. Like Kenneth Pike, who believed one could not

separate the two, emic and etic, apart, Charles is asking us to drop the dialectical debate

between Greenberg and others and see the painting for what it is-- a collection of our own

thoughts.   While, one may be more than welcome to view Charles' work through a

purely formal lens, in doing so, they miss the reasons behind the image. Charles' painted

surfaces are varied, they are textured and harsh. His lines, colors, and brushstrokes come

of the canvas as essential facts that reveal the act of painting, as did much of the Abstract

Expressionists work Greenberg and Fried supported. In an critique of Charles' work

Shaila Dewan alludes to a possibility that the paintings are created in a way as to suggest

much more than a working with the painterly, that they are made just to look old.

"Charles works hard to make his paintings look quaintly aged – creasing, scraping, and

tattering them."[18] Either way Charles is able to paint but he is also able to collect. What

we see, outside the etic/formal approach to the viewing of the work, is what is left with

us, the emic/content. Here, in the language all of know how to speak, lie Charles'

greatest strength. Within the etic we are brought to the emic:

> Michael Ray Charles, through his work, asks us to look at the "Pictures in our
> heads" and to discern how those pictures affect us all. There are many words
> written that defame and deflate self esteem, but the old adage, 'A Picture is Worth
> a Thousand Words' suggests that our visual images affect us even more
> powerfully than our words. Charles' work fives us an 'in your face.' up-close-
> and-personal look at the images that have defined African-American culture for
> centuries.[19]

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[18] Shaila Dewan. *The Art of Darkness. (*Houston Press, University of Houston. Jun 12, 1997): 3

[19] Michael Ray Charles. 1989-1997 Michael Ray Charles An American Artist's Work (Blaffer Art Gallery, University of Houston; 1997):15

Not everyone is so thrilled by the Charles' painting. According to a 2004 article by Shaila Dewan, support form black collectors for Charles' work is scarce. Dewan comments that while Charles is successful, he owes his financial success to white collectors, not black. This is not to say that Charles' work is not sought after by black collectors, Spike Lee is one of his main supporters. What should be mentioned is that his works find their way into the homes of white collectors then they do black collectors. One of the reasons for this lack of collection from black art patrons is that his images are too close for comfort. Houston art dealer, Betty Moody comments that in part the support of Charles' work by white buyers rests in the ability for white viewer's to shun responsibility within the content of the work. That in fact by being an outsider one is not responsible for the language used by the insider culture. Therefore it is easier to look in on what Charles is doing from the outside. "It's easy for the group not being discriminated against to ignore the problem…But this work doesn't allow you to ignore it…It's that too—closeness. To close to the pain."[20] What Dewan is commenting on here is that for the black viewer these works hurt, while for the white viewer they have the potential to heal. Charles does not suggest that they can ever heal the wrongs of the past. In the series of Charles' work titled *Forever Free* the viewer is confronted with images of advertising, American history, references to Norman Rockwell paintings and to loaded racist imagery of black "minstrels" and "mammies." Dewan suggests that while the *Forever Free* series of work spoke to the injustices of the past, the white critics were the first to jump on board, while the black critics were reluctant:

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[20] Shaila Dewan. *The Art of Darkness.* (Houston Press, University of Houston. Jun 12, 1997):4

The *Forever Free Post* series mimicked Norman Rockwell's affectionate style, offering minstrels, jesters, and kerchiefed mammies withholding slices of pie from clamoring white boys in a play on Rockwell's Saturday Evening Post covers. Collectors, all of them white, snapped up every piece, and white critics make Charles the undisputed star of the season. These critics perceived Charles as some kind of racial shaman. 'Art as a healing force.'…But apparently that perception is not one Charles himself shares. When asked how, exactly, his work can heal, Charles replied, 'Did I say that?' Well, not exactly. But can your work heal? 'No,' said Charles.[21]

Maybe the separation of white and black collectors of Charles' work is a fault in the emic/etic perspective. Here, the stereotyped group that the artist addresses in his narrative does not wish to be reminded, or even, referenced. Who could blame them? While the etic viewpoint accounts for a documentation of a cultural behaviorism from the outside, it is fair to say that we know how to address the culture being studied when we continue to attribute stereotypes to that culture we are watching. This is a vital question and one that is still left unanswered in Charles' work. When presented with the question as to who Charles was making his work for, he replied "that the art was for everyone."[22] Yet, while there are parts of the picture which are composites of the society at large maybe what we see is something that is comprised more of the mindsets from the outside, from the etic viewpoint. In Dewan's article, African American artist Elizabeth Catlett would go as far as saying that Charles is continuing discrimination by focusing on the imagery that harms, not helps. "'I think he's continuing the racism…If any black children see it, they will be irreparably harmed. I'd rather not talk about it, okay.'" [23]

Part of the problem for Charles' reception by black viewers is that his works do not bring about a positive image. The viewer does not walk away from the image with a

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[21] Shaila Dewan. *The Art of Darkness.* (Houston Press, University of Houston. Jun 12, 1997):3
[22] Ibid. 3
[23] Ibid. 7

weight removed and a lesson learned, per se. The viewer is confronted with the

realization that they are a part of a larger system and that system has done some pretty

bad things over time. What is even harder to wrestle with is the fact that this system

continues to this day, even giving new imagery for an artist who says he wants to turn the

mechanism in upon itself. In a situation when a positive aspect is needed to bridge

debates on race, Charles' images do not allow for an encouraging relationship between

white culture and black culture. Quite the opposite, the images are filled with

antagonistic aspects on both sides of the aisle. While there is hope that we have arrived

at a point where we can have this conversation, the conversation is not one that would be

an easy amalgamation. For the insider, what is seen is an attack on past and present.

From the outsider what is revealed is the passive willingness to let the stereotype

continue to an artificial optimism towards understanding. What is not seen is a look

into the future, not a direction for progress. Houston Project Row Houses founder Rick

Lowe, suggests he does not see much good to take from Charles' paintings. "'There are

certain things I don't want to claim. Like the word nigger. Why would you want to own

that?'"[24] Houston artists David McGee feels that Charles' work does not allow for

growth, to progress to a better position in our society, "his images don't turn the corner.

The work stays the same, it doesn't do anything…It's like watching *A Clockwork

Orange*, it's like watching victim after victim. We don't see his game plan for turning

this civilization around."[25]

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[24] Shaila Dewan. *The Art of Darkness.* (Houston Press, University of Houston. Jun 12, 1997):7
[25] Ibid. 7

What is evident in Charles' compositions is his odd sense of humor, if we can call it that. Characters, who in the past have been victims from external pressures, here carry the responsibility themselves, as if they could be more positive symbols if they really tried. This confusion between image and real life is what is at stake here. Is Charles commenting on what we have in our own imaginations or are these figures responsible for what they are? Are they meant to be humorous or are they meant to prod our darkest sicknesses on race? I think Dewan says it best. "Charles's brand of humor often feels like a test for witchcraft: Laugh, and you're guilty. Don't laugh, and you're guilty."[26] Guilt is an important response to these painting as it applies pressure to the etic viewer as much as the emic viewer. When we allow ourselves to continue to look at Charles' paintings we are all guilty for participating. We are guilty for thinking it is okay to continue this discussion, without dropping the subject. We are guilty for the pleasure and pain one gets from these images for it is from our own part that the stereotyping has continued to live on. We are guilty for watching as others are used to become cartoons. Finally, we are guilty for allowing our fears, angers, and dislike of others to drive what we buy into the world around us. Thus, the power of the bought victim becomes the critical blow in Charles' work. What we see in the images, above everything else, is that while we were watching the world sold us hatred and we ate it up. Advertising is the mechanism of transgression and we are all guilty for its overwhelming success.

The one way everyone has access to the Charles' paintings, at least in Western society, is through the reference to advertising. Many of the symbols present in the work derive from images that were in the past used for mass media consumption. In

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[26] Shaila Dewan. *The Art of Darkness.* (Houston Press, University of Houston. Jun 12, 1997):6

advertisements, the mammy, the Sambo, the blackface performer, etc. have become much more than a common images, they have become symbols used to describe a whole race of people. What Charles is calling attention to is the use of these symbols and how they have, over time, been used to degrade. The symbolic is built out of language, the terms, ideas, and content of a specific culture, which positions an image in relationship to an idea. Therefore, the symbolic is phonemic, resting within the emic method:

> The emic/etic distinction advanced by Kenneth Pike (1964) constitutes a strategic, conception in our attempt to understand how we apprehend images. The symbolic or emic, structure of vision parallels that of language: the phonemes, morphemes, and sentences of language have their equivalences in the optemes, graphemes and pictemes of vision…This is to say that the total symbolic environment of images is a contributing context to the meaning of such images.[27]

Reminiscent of the loaded meanings behind the references, these images cannot be comprehended easily, they need for the viewer to bring in a certain level of knowledge to the way we use advertisement. What is quickly realized is that the viewer's own level of attachment to the image, an established knowledge of what is right and wrong, leaves the viewer to ask himself or herself if the meaning they share with the image is the fault of advertisement or their own? The question between insider and outsider accountability displays the richness of the symbolic. The viewer is confronted by the job the image accomplishes in order to draw away responsibility from the viewer and at the same time the culture. Therefore, there is no one to blame for what the meaning's definition:

> Stereotypical images that injure have been as commonplace in American society as baseball and apple pie, and they relegate us all to a place where an individual's skin color is more defining than his or her character, morals, or intellect. We are thus confined to a time and space where who we see is not who we are, and the

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[27]Vito Signorile. Capitulating to Captions: The Verbal Transformations of Visual Images. (Human Studies 10, ¾ Springer. 1987): 283

pictures painted of us—both either words and images—are not really us, but a figment of someone else's imagination.[28]

What does the Sambo and the mammy mean? While some African American artists have appropriated the images for negative or positive use in the past, Charles's references carry both meanings. The Sambo and the mammy are compromised symbols, developed as a negative representation of black culture, but when African American artists appropriate these images, turning positive forces into lessons to learn. One of these artworks is Betty Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima.* This mixed media sculpture depicts a repurposed mammy doll, which has been given the tools to display African power and pride. The Saar image comes from the negative position but is brought to life when it acquires its positive features. The same mammy images used by Charles are not as clear. While Charles use of the mammy references the real life working black woman that reference is positive only because of the strength against the odds that woman succeeds against. What is understood but not talked about is the reasons that have placed that woman in the situation she has found herself in. "The "Aunt Jemima image was about power, about the domineering figure. I was placing her in the context of 'Wonder Woman.' The mammy was a wonder woman. She had the ability to take care of two households. To go to one job and work all day, and then come home and take care of her own family….She was a powerful figure, but also a stereotype. I'm dealing with strength, beauty. Things associated with women."[29] Charles finds comparison in his Sambo images. In the paintings, the Sambo caricature is referenced

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[28]Michael Ray Charles. 1989-1997 Michael Ray Charles An American Artist's Work (Blaffer Art Gallery, University of Houston; 1997): 7

[29]Ibid. 29

more often than other caricatures. The Sambo, in this case portrays negative and positive

in the same situation, as an image of the black man's relationship to sports, sexual

overtones, or violent situations. The Sambo seems to pop up everywhere, as forms of it

has in American advertisement for generations. Like advertisements that use the Sambo,

Charles' reference is also not a direct link to anything specific. Charles' Sambo is also a

construct:

> I abstract the images I use, the Sambo image. Historically, it was a tool used by
> blacks to survive—to escape lashings, etc. It was a survival tool/ Today it takes
> on an image of contempt, also an image to fear. It has taken on all these sinister
> components. The smile on the face, but you don't really know what's going on.
> I've taken the images and abstracted them. I want to deal with their evolution, but
> also to refer to them, more specifically, as characters. More in the realm of
> cartoons. To keep them from seeming too realistic, to much a reference to blacks.
> I've abstracted the caricatures, made them more playful, to acknowledge that the
> caricature elements shouldn't be the defining force of what the black experience
> is. I've thought about how these images were used in the past, and how they are
> used in the present. I place them in a present day context, so that one can
> reevaluate the presence of the past. These images question that. I poke fun at the
> images, I poke fun at advertising, I poke fun. I also make serious references to
> advertising. I try to link power and issues of superiority, gender issues,
> sexuality…My work is very much about communication.[30]

While Michael Ray Charles paints images that are derived from advertising,

history, symbolism and manipulation, he paints them for different types of viewers.

What is found in Charles' work is that responsibility is in question. While the emic

method gives responsibility to a specific group or culture what Charles' work seeks is the

realizations that we are coming from different place and exactly from the same place. In

an equivalent setting, we are faced with the question of outsider responsibility. Here,

focus is put on the white culture. But, as we have found out the white viewer carries as

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[30]Michael Ray Charles. 1989-1997 Michael Ray Charles An American Artist's Work
          (Blaffer Art Gallery, University of Houston; 1997): 28

much responsibility as the black viewer, the etic means as much as the emic. In much of the criticism from the black community, Charles crosses too many lines and brings the hurt of the past right to the front once again. Inside Charles' paintings the emic and the etic is needed for a true understanding. With the paintings of Michael Ray Charles we need both the emic/insider and the etic/outsider knowledge to realize what we have done and what we continue to do. Even though the lessons are sometimes hurtful, what Charles desires is that the realization bring progress.

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