TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

www.techniumscience.com

Vol. 72/2025

A New Decade for Social Changes

PLUS COMMUNICATION
International Communication & PR

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 72, 344-352, June, 2025
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

The meme-ification of black identity: tracing stereotypes from Southern literature to the digital age

Gabriela Poleac, Adriana Colibaba

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași

gabriela.poleac@uaic.ro; colibaba.adriana18@gmail.com

Abstract. From its literary roots in Southern American narratives to their rearticulation in modern meme culture, this paper explores the persistence and evolution of African-American stereotypes. The study begins with a critical analysis of Southern literature from the 19th and early 20th centuries, highlighting the historical construction of Black identity through reductive tropes. The article then examines how meme culture, through irony, remix, and repetition, functions as a site of resistance and a tool of stereotype amplification, building on ideas of digital culture and media virality. The analysis shows how humour, affect, and platform logics can re-inscribe historically sensitive imagery under the pretence of entertainment by using a collection of viral memes that contain African-American characters or tropes. The article concludes by considering the current ramifications of this meme-ification process, including its impact on racial social discourse, cultural identity, and public perception. The meme economy frequently maintains a feedback cycle that normalises and propagates racialised tropes in novel, digitally mediated ways, regardless of acts of rebellion.

Keywords. African-American stereotypes, Southern literature, Meme culture, Digital representation

Introduction

The portrayal of African-American identity has undergone a complex evolution, shaped by cultural, social, and political forces spanning centuries. From the deeply rooted stereotypes that emerged in antebellum Southern literature to the dynamic, ironic reworkings in today's digital meme culture, the construction and dissemination of Black identity continues to oscillate between caricature and instrument. Southern literature (particularly from the 19th and early 20th centuries) played a foundational role in codifying reductive depictions of African American individuals, casting them in roles such as the "happy slave," the "mammy," or the "brute," which not only reflected but also reinforced the racial ideologies of their time. These literary stereotypes served as cultural tools for maintaining racial hierarchies and justifying systemic oppression.

In the early 19th century, the Northern states' decision to abolish slavery did not bring about the harmony many hoped for. Instead, tensions deepened as the Southern states remained steady in their commitment to enslaving African Americans. Southern defenders of slavery argued that the practice was not only vital to national economic health and agricultural progress

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 72, 344-352, June, 2025
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

but also beneficial to the enslaved themselves, portraying them as content with their roles. Rather than acknowledging the inhumanity of slavery, proponents redirected the discussion to emphasize the supposed care and paternalism extended to slaves by white plantation owners. This rhetorical shift laid the groundwork for the romanticized "Plantation Myth," a cultural construct that depicted Southern society as harmonious and orderly, with each racial group peacefully occupying its predetermined social role.

Through this myth, an idealized vision of plantation life emerged – one rooted in tradition, chivalry, and stability. Slavery, in this narrative, was not brutal or dehumanizing but instead portrayed as a benevolent and structured institution. Southern intellectuals vigorously defended this view through various forms of writing, including "political speeches, editorials, newspaper articles, pamphlets, court decisions, Sunday sermons, and novels" [1, p. 5]. Among these, literature proved particularly influential due to its broad reach and lasting cultural imprint. This gave rise to a specific literary form known as proslavery literature, a genre constructed by antebellum Southern writers who aimed to rationalize slavery and vindicate plantation life. These authors frequently portrayed slaveholders as moral, Christian patriarchs who treated their slaves with kindness and concern, thereby earning their loyalty and affection [2, p. 59]. By doing so, they attempted to reframe the image of the South as a place of civility and benevolence, where African Americans supposedly benefited from white oversight.

One of the primary rhetorical strategies employed in this genre was the moral justification of slavery through the lens of paternalism. The supporters claimed that slavery provided African Americans with structure, discipline, and purpose. They suggested that without the guidance of the white master, African Americans – depicted as inherently inferior and prone to immoral behaviour – would remain uncivilized. Writers emphasized that planters were elevating these so-called "heathens" into God-fearing, decent members of society. The enslaved, in turn, were framed as being better off under the supervision of their masters than they would be if left to their own devices. The metaphor of the patriarchal family underpinned this worldview, with the white master occupying a fatherly role over his dependent slaves. This dynamic served to naturalize the social hierarchy and reinforce racial divisions. Slavery, in this narrative, was not exploitative but rather a form of care, where labour offered enslaved people a meaningful existence free from the stress of competition with white Americans. Proslavery texts thus reflected deeply entrenched racial ideologies that portrayed African Americans as fundamentally different and in need of white governance. This view is echoed in the writings of Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, defender of slavery, who claimed that under the benevolent rule of their masters, slaves had become "more attached, more content with their condition, less licentious and more honest" [3, p. 337].

These literary efforts succeeded in shaping public perception, creating enduring archetypes that masked the realities of slavery. Characters such as the loyal servant, the loving "mammy," and the docile labourer emerged as staples of the Southern mythos. These depictions were not only widespread but also appealing, turning the plantation system into a nostalgic symbol of a lost golden age. After the Civil War, Southern writers intensified their efforts to idealize the antebellum period and disseminate a collective memory. They mourned the Confederacy's defeat while praising the virtues of the old Southern way of life, rebranding slavery as a civilizing force rather than a brutal institution. In post-war literature, the plantation became an emblem of Southern charm, surrounded by recurring motifs like moonlit nights, grand oak trees, magnolia blossoms, and genteel white families. This mythical version of the South shined over the cruelty of slavery and instead presented a pastoral idyll where everyone—white and black—knew their place and supposedly lived in harmony. Thus, literature served as

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 72, 344-352, June, 2025
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

a powerful tool for advancing this myth, accessible to all and capable of justifying the South's continued embrace of racial hierarchy [1, p. 26].

Historical background: stereotypes in Southern literature

In proslavery literature, African Americans were commonly portrayed through a series of stereotypes that served to justify the institution of slavery and reinforce white supremacy. These depictions consistently framed enslaved people as ignorant, lazy, carefree, and loyal, thereby suggesting that slavery was protective and ultimately beneficial to them. The underlying implication was that African Americans were inherently incapable of self-sufficiency or independence. They supposedly lacked formal education, intelligence, self-discipline, and moral integrity necessary to own property, hold jobs equal to whites, or participate fully in society. This view aligned with the paternalistic ideology dominant in the South, which indoctrinated African Americans from birth to accept their designated subordinate role in a racially stratified society.

White Southern fiction had the clear purpose of affirming the planter's dominance and racial hierarchy within their geographic sphere. The master's relationships – with his wife, children, and slaves – served to justify his absolute authority and the social order predicated on race. While white characters, particularly masters, symbolized power, control, and the grandeur of plantation life, African American slaves were frequently used as a source of comic relief, bringing lightness and entertainment to the narrative. As Francis Gaines notes, "The negro is endowed with humour. His utter abandon in enjoying his mirth, his eagerness in the pursuit of merriment, his unfailing jocularity, these are proverbial" [4, p. 67]. This characterization positioned African Americans as natural entertainers, almost instinctive comedians whose light-heartedness provided an emotional release from the story's tensions.

These characters were often depicted with exaggerated physical features and theatrical personality traits. They were immature, irresponsible, and sometimes childish, prone to lying and stealing. Their living conditions were portrayed as simple and impoverished – small cabins, minimal possessions – but they were nonetheless happy and idle, spending their days playing the banjo, singing, telling stories, or enjoying watermelon on hot summer days. These images became deeply ingrained stereotypes, shaping white perceptions of African Americans for decades. Gaines quotes C. S. Johnson's vivid summary of this clownish and captivating image:

He is lazy, shiftless, and happy-go-lucky, loves watermelon, carries a razor, emits a peculiar odor, shoots craps, grins instead of smiles – is noisily religious, loves red, dresses flashily, loves gin, and can sing. On the stage he is presented lying easily, using long words he does not understand, drinking gin, stealing chickens, and otherwise living up to the joke book tradition. [4, p. 17]

Among these traits, humour was the most cherished psychological characteristic attributed to African Americans, as it was intended to entertain the white public and evoke their compassion and affection for this seemingly harmless, light-hearted figure. Even African Americans' clothing was portrayed to provoke laughter – often either ragged or absurdly flashy—reinforcing the stereotype of their unsuitability for American society. The "happy darky", as this character was called, combined exaggerated religious devotion (though simultaneously superstitious and naive) with a sort of innate folk wisdom, rhythmic talent, and love for music and dance. These characters frequently told amusing anecdotes or animal fables in exaggerated dialects, reaching comic climaxes that highlighted their whimsical, rather than serious, natures. Their moral failings were portrayed as trivial or laughable rather than culpable, emphasizing an image of carefree joviality regardless of hardships [4, p. 64].

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 72, 344-352, June, 2025
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

Because these characters were simple types rather than fully shaped individuals, the literature written by slavery supporters reflected a broader tendency toward generalization and stereotyping. This process helped white authors maintain control over an unstable social order by categorizing African Americans into predictable, easily understandable roles. By reducing African Americans to recognizable types, whites reassured themselves and their audiences that these people were safe and manageable workers, not threats to the status quo. This categorization also allowed whites to claim familiarity and control over the "other," erasing the complexities and individuality of African American lives. Gaines observes this phenomenon by noting that "thus, when an American citizen speaks of 'knowing a nigger like a book'. He usually has in mind such traits" [4, p. 65]. Plantation literature, in portraying African Americans as docile, trivial, and even simple-minded, sought to convince the wider American public that slavery was a necessary institution protecting African Americans from their own alleged barbarity.

To counter accusations of slavery's brutality – including violence, rape, and harsh punishments – Southern intellectuals developed a range of endearing African American stereotypes. These included the loyal uncle, nurturing aunt, and devoted mammy figures, who were presented as beloved members of the white family. These motifs painted slavery as a benevolent system based on reciprocal affection and mutual benefit. In these narratives, the focus shifted from the exploitative nature of forced labour to the loyalty and devotion slaves supposedly felt toward their masters and the Southern community as a whole. This portrayal not only minimized the realities of oppression but also sought to humanize the institution of slavery by emphasizing care and family-like bonds across racial lines.

Southern proslavery advocates used a range of media – initially print, and later electronic – to disseminate this myth of slavery's benevolence and indispensability. Their propaganda took many forms, including "cartoons, caricatures, and advertisements, artifacts such as cookie jars, dolls, salt and pepper shakers, and numerous other collectibles and memorabilia" [5, p. 227]. These cultural products extended and reinforced the literary stereotypes, embedding them deeply into American popular culture. Together, these portrayals created a nostalgic image of slavery and African American life under it, one that obscured the cruelty of the system and persisted in various forms well beyond the antebellum period.

The development of hegemonic narratives throughout many technical eras is remarkably similar, as evidenced by the transition from antebellum stereotyped iconography to modern meme culture. Today's digital platforms use algorithmic curation and participatory mechanisms to shape cultural discourse, much like Southern pro-slavery advocates strategically used a variety of media formats to instil their sanitised version of slavery into the public consciousness.

Understanding meme culture

The foundation of meme culture is what Jenkins [6] refers to as "participatory culture", a culture in which people feel their contributions are valued, where there are few obstacles to artistic expression and civic involvement, and where there is a strong incentive to create and share one's work. Rapid iteration and dissemination of memetic content are made possible by the technological scaffolding provided by platforms such as Reddit, Instagram, TikTok, and X. According to Terranova [7], these platforms' algorithmic curation processes determine which memes become well-known and which disappear, resulting in what she refers to as the "attention economy", where engagement metrics, clicks, and shares are used to assess cultural value.

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 72, 344-352, June, 2025
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

Contemporary youth culture has grown so deeply interconnected with memes that "students often make meaning of texts by connecting them to other texts from the popular culture they know and value" (p. 66), as noted by Hartman et al. [8, p. 66] in their educational research. Digital culture has radically changed cognitive and interpretive practices, especially among younger generations who have grown up surrounded by these networked communication systems, as evidenced by the incorporation of meme culture into meaning-making processes.

Meme culture functions through several key processes that support cultural reproduction and meaning-making. The first is *intertextuality*: memes create intricate networks of cultural knowledge by referencing other cultural texts, which may exclude people without the requisite cultural capital, yet reward insider knowledge. To create what Marwick and Boyd [9] refer to as "context collapse", when several social contexts blend in unforeseen ways, a successful meme frequently necessitates familiarity with various cultural references, including pop culture moments, historical events, and prior memes. *Iterative transformation* is the second mechanism. Memes are made to be altered, in contrast to established media formats that tend to remain relatively stable. While staying connected to the initial design, each iteration may introduce additional layers of significance. The significance of variation in memetic evolution, where cultural forces influence meme survival and replication, is reflected in this process, as noted by Dennett [10]. *Affective resonance* is the third mechanism. Memes are successful because they evoke strong emotions like humour, recognition, outrage, and nostalgia in addition to logical communication. Memes are able to infiltrate cultural consciousness and circumvent critical faculties thanks to their emotive dimension.

The same three primary mechanisms that are intimately related to historical patterns of cultural reproduction are responsible for the conversion of stereotypical images of African Americans from tangible artefacts to digital memes. An example of how modern meme culture generates networks of cultural information that resemble antebellum stereotyped imagery is the phenomena of "digital blackface" [11]. Modern memes require knowledge of overlapping cultural references, much like Southern propagandists inserted stereotypes into commonplace items that required cultural literacy to interpret their ideological meanings. Afro-American reaction GIFs are so common that they are almost interchangeable with simple reaction GIFs, resulting in the "context collapse" [9] – the blending of modern digital expression with historical prejudices. Similar to how antebellum audiences required cultural knowledge to interpret stereotypical imagery on household items, the intertextual nature of memes like "an outraged Tyra Banks on America's Next Top Model shouting, 'I was rooting for you!' or Michael Jordan crying at his induction into the Basketball Hall of Fame" requires that users understand both the original media context and the memetic transformation [12].

According to the second mechanism, "a practice where White people co-opt online expressions of Black imagery, slang, catchphrases, or culture to convey comic relief or express emotions" is how digital blackface functions [13]. Dennett's memetic evolution theory, in which each change preserves ties to the original design while adding new levels of meaning, is mirrored in this iterative process. As a direct continuation of minstrel show traditions, digital blackface develops from a legacy of white people making caricatures of Black people's speech and behaviour. Similar to how antebellum iconography changed across many material mediums while retaining consistent racist characterisations, each meme iteration – whether a TikTok video or a reaction GIF – maintains essential stereotyped components while adjusting to new digital contexts.

In contrast to rational communication, the third mechanism demonstrates how digital blackface reinforces "racist stereotypes, such as, for example, the sassy or angry black woman"

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 72, 344-352, June, 2025
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

through emotional engagement [14]. Similar to how antebellum artefacts normalised racist imagery through their incorporation into domestic comfort and familiarity, modern memes achieve similar affective resonance by evoking humour, recognition, or nostalgia while avoiding critical analysis of their stereotypical content.

How memes reinforce stereotypes

Political neutrality does not apply to meme culture. Memes' generation and dissemination perpetuate current power systems and give rise to new kinds of cultural stratification, even though they seem to democratise the process of creating material. The digital barriers that organise participation – having access to high-speed internet, being conversant with platform norms, and having the cultural capital required to negotiate intricate intertextual references successfully – are concealed by the seeming ease of creating memes. Furthermore, meme culture's light-hearted appearance might mask important political efforts. Researchers have shown that memes can be used to propagate racial stereotypes by enclosing historically damaging images in formats that seem innocuous because of their comic framing [15]. What some academics refer to as "ironic racism" occurs when damaging stereotypes are reinforced through claims of humour rather than malice because of the ironic distancing that permeates much of meme culture and permits the dissemination of problematic content under the pretence of parody or satire.

The political economy of meme culture is likewise shaped by the platform capitalism that supports it. While taking no accountability for the societal repercussions of user-generated content, tech businesses profit from it. According to Tufekci [16], the attention economy provides systematic incentives for content that causes polarisation or reinforces negative stereotypes by rewarding content that is contentious or emotionally charged. Further complications arise from the interaction of identity construction and meme culture. As a kind of cultural capital, meme literacy is becoming more and more popular among young people, who employ complex memetic references to show that they belong to different communities. Making in-groups and out-groups based on cultural knowledge, which frequently corresponds with demographic traits like age, race, class, and educational attainment, can also serve to perpetuate exclusionary practices.

The three mechanisms of meme culture are transformed into methodical instruments for sustaining and escalating African American prejudices at formerly unheard-of levels by the power of algorithmic amplification. According to Boyd et al. [17], social media affordances engineered for shareability allow material to reach exponentially bigger audiences through a process known as networked amplification, in which users serve as intermediaries between various networks, disseminating knowledge from one community to another. However, this amplification works by rewarding content that is contentious or emotionally charged, which is exactly the kind of content that makes stereotyped images so powerful, according to what Tufekci [16] refers to as engagement-driven algorithms. The amplification effect turns individual digital consumption into collective cultural reinforcement that functions at unimaginable scales, with each engagement with stereotypical memes contributing to their algorithmic prioritisation.

Through engagement-driven revenue models that give priority to viral content regardless of its social repercussions, platform capitalism monetises the maintenance of racial stereotypes, as the amplification effect demonstrates. According to Ellison and Vitak [18], social media platforms' shareability affordances allow for rapid dissemination across a variety of networks; but, when used for stereotypical content, this process speeds up negative

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 72, 344-352, June, 2025
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

representations rather than progressive messaging. When stereotyped memes spread, the uncertainty Boyd et al. [17] describe about "whose voice is being amplified" becomes especially troublesome because frequent sharing and remixing conceals the original context and possible harm.

While digital amplification allows a single stereotypical meme to reach millions of users in a matter of hours, unlike the limited reach of antebellum material artefacts, these images become embedded in the global consciousness with unprecedented speed and penetration. At the same time, platforms profit from engagement metrics without taking responsibility for the societal consequences [19].

Contemporary reflections: memes, identity, and public perception

The proslavery literary canon did more than distort historical truth – it crafted enduring stereotypes that continued to shape perceptions of African Americans well into the future. These romanticized portrayals of happy, loyal slaves blurred the line between reality and fiction, making it easier for future generations to downplay the moral atrocity of slavery. The transition of these portraits into postbellum narratives and modern media, such as minstrel shows and later, memes, illustrates how deeply these caricatures were embedded in American cultural consciousness. As a result, the figures created in these literary works – initially designed to justify oppression – have persisted in various forms, influencing portrayals of African Americans across generations.

The progression of racial stereotypes from antebellum stereotyped iconography to modern meme culture demonstrates unsettling consistency in the ways that these prejudices are created, propagated, and ingrained in American culture. The three main processes of digital meme culture – intertextuality, iterative transformation, and affective resonance – are shown in this analysis to function as technical manifestations of the same propaganda techniques used by pro-slavery Southerners. Similar to how 19th-century advocates purposefully included romanticised slave imagery into a variety of media, from books to everyday items, modern internet platforms use algorithmic curation and interactive features to reinforce negative preconceptions about African Americans. In addition to being a technological change, the move from tangible artefacts like dolls and stereotypical cookie jars to viral reaction GIFs and memes symbolises a fundamental amplification of preexisting patterns of narrative control and cultural manipulation.

Due to the amplification effect of digital platforms, racial prejudice is now being sustained on previously inconceivable scales through the systematic use of individual stereotyped representations. Social media companies profit from the spread of damaging stereotypes while evading accountability for the effects on society through engagement-driven algorithms that favour material that is divisive or emotionally charged. Instead of promoting progressive messaging, the shareability affordances that Boyd et al. [17] describe as democratising factors rather serve as tools for accelerating negative representations. Furthermore, digital amplification creates feedback loops in which every encounter leads to algorithmic prioritisation and broader diffusion. Thus, the "ironic racism" is transformed into a systematised type of cultural violence by this technological acceleration.

Through the use of affective resonance, both historical and digital blackface circumvent critical thinking by evoking strong emotional reactions. Without taking into account the underlying racial dynamics, users spread these memes because they find them humorous or relatable. People can maintain damaging preconceptions while claiming to be "just joking" due to the "ironic distance" of internet culture.

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 72, 344-352, June, 2025
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

The fact that these trends have persisted throughout technological eras highlights a basic reality of American cultural production: advancements in means of communication frequently create new avenues for the operation and escalation of underlying racial oppressive systems rather than necessarily upending them. The literary canon of proslavery's ability to create persistent stereotypes that "continued to shape perceptions of African Americans well into the future" is still evident today in viral memes that confuse humour and cruelty. These digital artefacts show how platform capitalism turns historical racial stereotyping tendencies into lucrative engagement metrics as they are amplified by algorithms and rooted in the global consciousness.

References

[1] Tracy, S. J. (1995). *In the master's eye: Representations of women, blacks, and poor whites in antebellum Southern literature*. University of Massachusetts Press.

[2] Gray, R., & Robinson, O. (2004). *A companion to the literature and culture of the American South*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

[3] Tucker, N. B. (1836). Review of Slavery in the United States. *Southern Literary Messenger, 2*, 336-338.

[4] Gaines, F. P. (1924). *The southern plantation: A study in the development and the accuracy of a tradition.* Columbia University Press.

[5] Bercaw, N., & Ownby, T. (2009). *The new encyclopedia of southern culture: Gender.* The University of North Carolina Press.

[6] Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. NYU Press.

[7] Terranova, T. (2013). Free labor. In T. Scholz (Ed.), *Digital labor: The internet as playground and factory* (p. 46). Routledge.

[8] Hartman, P., Berg, J., Fulton, H. R., & Schuler, B. (2021). Memes as means: Using popular culture to enhance the study of literature. *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, 26*(1), 8.

[9] Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New media & society, 13*(1), 114-133.

[10] Dennett, D. (1995). *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. Simon & Schuster

[11] Popsci. (2018). *How GIFs could be perpetuating racial stereotypes online* | Canvas8. Canvas8. Availabe at: https://www.canvas8.com/blog/2018/jul/digital-blackface-internet-memes-communications-popsci

[12] Rosenfield, K. (2023, March 29). *Stop trying to make "digital blackface" happen.* UnHerd. Available at": https://unherd.com/2023/03/stop-trying-to-make-digital-blackface-happen/

[13] Blake, J. (2023, March 26). *What's "digital blackface?" And why is it wrong when White people use it?* CNN. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/26/us/digital-blackface-social-media-explainer-blake-cec/index.html

[14] Ashley, W. (2014). The angry black woman: The impact of pejorative stereotypes on psychotherapy with black women. *Social work in public health, 29*(1), 27-34.

[15] Milner, H. R. (2016). A Black male teacher's culturally responsive practices. *The Journal of Negro Education, 85*(4), 417-432.

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 72, 344-352, June, 2025
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

[16] Tufekci, Z. (2018). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest.* Yale University Press.

[17] boyd, d., Golder, S., & Lotan, G. (2010). Tweet, tweet, retweet: Conversational aspects of retweeting on Twitter. *Proceedings of the 43rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences,* 1-10.

[18] Ellison, N. B., & Vitak, J. (2015). Social network site affordances and their relationship to social capital processes. In S. S. Sundar (Ed.), *The handbook of the psychology of communication technology* (pp. 205-227). John Wiley & Sons.

[19] Alhabash, S., & Ma, M. (2017). A tale of four platforms: Motivations and uses of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat among college students? *Social Media + Society, 3*(1), 1-13.