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Representation of Racism in Antebellum Movie

Semiotic analysis of Roland Barthes

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ABSTRACT

Racism is a problem that has existed throughout the world since ancient times. Indonesia also does not escape the issue of racism. From the small issues that we did not realize until the big problems involving many parties. This racism makes the atmosphere uncomfortable and conducive if it has to involve many parties. Therefore, many filmmakers who try to raise the theme of racism become a film. Analysis of racism in "Antebellum" movie written and diricted by Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz. This research discuses the discrimination by white people to black people in Antebellum Movie. Black people and white people is separated by many rules that makes black people is intimidate, so racism is still growing up until generations. Racismmostly still happens in many countries, especially the country with a lot of majoritiesand minority groups with very strict differences in characteristics such as in the UnitedStates of America or other European countries.This research used semiotic analysis with the descriptive qualitative methods. This study aims to find out the contents of the film Antebellum, especially those related to forms of acts of racism. The lastresult of analysis, the researcher also found the Struggle that does by the black people in Antebellum Movie.

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Introduction

A country which has a diverse social and cultural population sometimes lead to social inequity. Racism is one of the causes of social inequity that exist and happened around the world. Slavery has been a nightmare for black people all over the world for over a thousand years and it is one of the racism that always occurs to black people in United States. History demonstrates how cruel white people were who freely trafficked, enslaved, and tortured black people. Until now, racial trauma has left an indelible imprint, and discrimination persists. Racism is a concept that excludes a group of people based on their race or ethnicity [1]. Moreover, Ref. [2] analyze prejudice and discrimination in America and split them into five parts of social structure: economic life, political and legal procedures, family patterns and intermarriage, religious institutions, and education. If this understanding is correctly interpreted, it may lead to differences in how people view others based on a variety of factors, such as skin colour, nationality, faith, and race. In reality, since everyone is born differently, prejudice does not exist because we are all one unit, regardless of ethnicity or race. However, many people continue to underestimate one another, allowing prejudice to existing in daily life. They believe that these various groups deserve to be bullied, resulting in several instances of racism around the world, including one in the United States.

This study uses a semiotic theory of Roland Barthes and with the qualitative descriptive approach. Semiotics is the study of anything that'represents' something else, not just what we call'signs' in everyday speech. Signs are words, images, sounds, movements, and objects in the semiotic sense [3]. Semiotics became the dominant approach to cultural studies in the late 1960s, thanks in part to Roland Barthes' work. Roland Barthes was the first to apply semiotic ideas derived from linguistics to visual images such as food advertising, photography, and motion pictures. The work of Roland Barthes provides a useful summary of the important aspects of semiotics discussed above. Essentially, it seeks to investigate how the meaning we associate with images is not a "natural" result of what we see; that is, they are manipulated [4]. The Data obtained by researchers in the process of preparing is pieces of a scene contained in the film Antebellum. Researchers gather other resources such as articles, journals, and books, both print and digital related racism as supporting data. The results of the analysis of the film Antebellum divided into three groups, namely racism againstblack people, discrimination against black people, and racial inequality.

The trailer for *Antebellum*, starring Janelle Monáe, promises a film that never comes to fruition: a psychological study of the depravity of slavery recontextualized through the cultural consciousness of a modern-day Black woman. The short clip evokes the unsettling atmosphere of a *Black Mirror* episode and the horror sensibilities of Jordan Peele, but the nearly two-hour film rarely explores the inner life of its heroine. Its narrative centers on a surface-level thesis

that is based on the degradation and exploitation of Black women's bodies. A film about slavery can't tell the truth about the legacy of white supremacy without including the bloody consequences of state-sanctioned oppression. But when watching movies in this genre, one has to ask: Who is this movie for? *Antebellum*'s portrayal of slavery is neither revolutionary nor unique. The film is less of a psychological thriller and more of a dystopian fantasy about a version of white supremacy that has a single unchanging face.

The movie ominously opens with a quote from William Faulkner's 1951 novel, *Requiem for a Nun*: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The quote seems to function as an anchor for a central narrative theme, which is exemplified through Veronica's (Janelle Monáe) harrowing journey. Before we meet Veronica, we're transported to a sprawling Southern plantation, flanked by Confederate soldiers, that echoes Scarlett O'Hara's beloved Tara. Within the first 30 minutes, we witness Black women being brutalized: When an unnamed Black woman attempts to escape, she's not only shot and killed, but she's also lassoed around the neck and dragged from the back of a horse. The gold septum ring in her nose gives pause, but there are no other visual clues that indicate something is amiss. Later, Monáe's character, who is called "Eden," is beaten and branded for being disobedient. In a 2019 essay for *Vulture*, Lauren Michele Jackson, an assistant professor of English at Northwestern University, explored how most mainstream movies about slavery linger on corporal punishment, placing an emphasis on the desecration of the Black body through pained shots of scarred backs and fresh wounds bloomed from the lashing of a whip.

Divided into three parts, Antebellum actually has enormous potential to bring up this very sensitive theme with it's own surprises. The three parts themselves are very precise in terms of sequences. But unfortunately, there isn't a deep sense of connection between each part.

When it reaches the third part, the audience will notice the amount of foreshadowing that has been in there since the first part. But it still only established a relationship on the surface without any deep meaning. It may become clear why Eden was seen as the leader of the resistance on the plantation, but this only rises questions about his implied intentions. Did the writers intend to instill that the movers of the movement had to come from academia?

"Anyone who needs a well-choreographed whipping to be convinced slavery is worth consideration is already at a deficit far too grave to be remedied in a smidge over two hours," Jackson wrote. "This perspective, however, is far from unanimous in recent cinematic history." *Antebellum* doesn't seem to share Jackson's belief, as it uses Black women as sacrificial props to reinforce the immorality of slavery and elicit viewer empathy. In another harrowing sequence of events, Julia (Kiersey Clemons), a pregnant Black woman, is viciously attacked by

a young white soldier named Daniel (Robert Aramayo) hours after she and Eden are forced to serve Confederate troops at an outdoor dinner, which causes her to miscarry as she works in the fields. Soon after this incident, Julia dies by suicide. The tragedy of her story mirrors the unconscionable horrors of human bondage and the culmination of white male rage, but who is she beyond her suffering?

With the exception of Eden, all of the Black characters trapped on the plantation have been robbed of their agency. They have been forbidden to speak to one another and thus, most of them remain silent, because they've seemingly accepted their hellish fate. A Black man named Eli, who is simply referred to as the "Professor" (Tongayi Chirisa), conspires with Eden to plot an escape, but he lacks an interior life and functions as a tool to propel her salvation. Midway through the film, we learn that Eden and Veronica—a successful Black author with a PhD in sociology, a doting mother to a young daughter, and a loving wife—are the same woman. She's a skilled equestrian and a devout practitioner of hot yoga who gives polished speeches peppered with social-justice buzzwords that make right-wing pundits foam at the mouth. And after a night out with her friends, she is kidnapped and brought to the plantation. Veronica is the Hollywood manifestation of Black excellence, the idealization of Black feminine strength, and proof that someday "women can have it all."

Her refusal to function as a token in her personal and professional life makes her a high-priority target for an underground network of white Southern nationalists who want to punish her for being unapologetically Black, successful, and visible. In many respects, Veronica exposes a flaw in respectability politics: White supremacists are threatened by Black people regardless of their level of education, tax bracket, or professional accolades. But what does her story lose when the film's big twist is revealed? *Antebellum* was initially dressed in the trappings of a time-travel story, evoking comparisons to Octavia Butler's seminal 1979 novel, *Kindred*. Although *Kindred* is a deft examination of the physical and psychological impact of slavery, it doesn't sensationalize history or fetishize violence. In Ref. [5], Butler said, "The reason for my writing this novel really was to try to make people feel the past as well as understand the facts of it to understand it [the slavery experience] in your skin, in your mind, in your emotions, to feel it."

Kindred succeeds because the narrative might make us uncomfortable, but it doesn't reduce its characters to caricatures. While *Antebellum* incorporates some of the same themes, it positions the past as a bygone era that racists want to return to rather than an inheritance that influences and manipulates the present. Similarly, Veronica being a target for the wrath of vengeful bigots is the exaggerated cinematic treatment of a reaction shared by white supremacists. Racist white people in positions of power (and racists overall) generally don't like people of color who speak out. This is evident from the way those who practice civil

disobedience, including Martin Luther King Jr., Colin Kaepernick, and the Black Panthers have been treated. History shows us why we shouldn't be so shocked [6]. However, Veronica is more of a placeholder for these histories rather than a fully realized character. While it's difficult to tell how long Veronica has been a prisoner at the plantation, she seems to have risen to the ranks of a leader, a saviormolded out of the blueprint of Harriet Tubman. She's there to amplify the sociopathic proclivities of her captors, turning their hatred into cartoonish villainy.

In an interview with *IndieWire*, Christopher Renz, the film's cowriter and codirector, said, "This movie really is a visual representation of what 'Make America Great Again' would look like" [7]. However, white supremacy is a shape-shifter that doesn't commit to a static form. This is key to its pervasiveness and its survival. In fact, the evolution of white supremacy, from slave codes and Jim Crow to stop-and-frisk [8] shows that it's an ideology willing and able to adapt. Tressie McMillan Cottom defines this heightened awareness as understanding "the psychology of white people and the elasticity of whiteness" [9]. Blackness, she reasons, is not a direct response to whiteness, but whiteness is a defense mechanism: "Whiteness, the idea, the identity tethered to no nation or origin, no place, no gods, exists only if it can expand enough to defend its position over every group that challenges the throne… For that situational dominance to reproduce itself, there must be a steady pole. That pole is blackness."

Methods

In this research, the researcher analyzed the research by using *Descriptive Qualitative.* Descriptive method is a method of research to examine the status of an object, a condition, a system of thought, an event or even status of a group of men.

According to Ref. [10] qualitative research is an investigation that based on the assumption of the individuals that construct a social reality in the form of individuals. The data in this study were collected in the form of words or sentences which were taken from the movie then were analyzed and interpreted. This is also constructing the social reality in the form of meaning and interpretation, and lest this construction tends to be temporary and situational. In this aspect the researcher is interested to analyze how is the racism in a movie titled "Antebellum" by using semiotic analysis by Roland Barthes to interpret the data in the form of words or sentences.

The reason the reasearcherer chose the qualitative descriptive reasearch design was because the researcher wanted to describe the situation that would be observed in the field more specifically, transparently, and in depth.

Results and Discussions

A. Data 01

In this sence Senator Blake angry to Veronica Henley (Aden) because in that part Senator Blake ask to Veronica who is her name, but Veronica didn't answer the question from Blake. Therefore, Blake tortured Veronica by slapping, hitting,kicking and placinga heatediron on Veronica's back so that she would sayher name.

Senator Blake : "Silent!! You will speak only when I instruct you to speak! I'm responsible for you now,and i will tame your savage ways".

After that she said her name while crying "Eden... Eden..."

(9:33-9:44)

In this scene white people think black people have a savage life. so they are held captive to be educated and forced to work. even though what they are doing includes acts of racism that demean black people.

B. Data 02

Senator Blake :"Our nationalist territory will not be stolen from us by those traitorous Americans". (25:04-25:10)

In this part Blake is leading a dinner meeting with the soldiers and elizabeth with her husband. Blake discusses how they should take American nationalist territory into their white hands, while they celebrate their victory in capturing new niggers to hire. These white people want to dominate the American nationalist territory where the original tribes in America are black people, namely Aboriginal and Indian tribes. Because these white people don't like black natives, and they think black people are not equal to their race, therefore they want to dominate the territory of American nationalists by their tribes.

C. Data 03

Senator Blake :"the sapphires are here to fulfill your every need". (25:44-25:52)

In this part blake offers his soldiers whatever their needs will be taken care of by the sapphire, namely black people who are captured and forced to work for them without pay and must obey the rules they make. They employ black people who on average are activists, professors in America who want to equalize equal rights between blacks and whites and want to stop racism by white people. But the white man was disgusted by the black man, they captured the black man to be employed as he pleased. They despise the tribe of black people.

D. Data 04

Daniel : "You have no rights". (30:34-30:35)

In this part Daniel is angry with Julia, a black woman who has just been taken prisoner, because Julia is trying to seduce Daniel in her room. while the rules are the sapphires who are employed there are not allowed to say anything before being ordered to speak by white people.

Because of that, Daniel was so angry that he slapped and beat Julia until she fell. In that scene, the racist action is that the captive black man has no right to speak before the white man tells him to speak.

E. Data 05

In this scene Veronica Henley sees herself trending during an interview on a split-screen CNN segment, which at the time discusses black equality with the release of her book entitled "The Coping Persona".

Host (TimotyPaul): "I understand you think you are defending the plight of the black man I guess, in your case... The black women...but we are doing a diservice to the argument.. much less your people"

Veronica Henley : I would say this... the disenfranchisement of black people in America, is by design... "WRITTEN INTO THE ACTUAL DNA OF THIS COUNTRY"

(41:07-41:13)

In the delivering the interview argument, Veronica stated that, dislike and injustice for black people had been instiled long ago by white people in their country. Veronica strongly emphasizes that perception creates racism that was deliberately started by white people so that black people's rights are revoked, black people cannot live freely on part with white people, so that from generation to generation, this perception is continuously embedded and attached like DNA for white people from now on, black people do not get rights like white people, they are excluded,criticized as bad, and not respected.

F. Data 06

In this scene Veronica gets a video call with a woman named Elizabeth. They had a short chat about Veronica's interview, which continues to trend, namely the black equality. Elizabeth invited to meet Veronica, but Veronica refused the invitation, because considering her busy schedule, also because when the call had just started Elizabeth gave her a bad impression by stating the sentence :

Elizabeth : "That lipstick just look lovely on you.. it suits your skin tone. I don't think I could pull it off." (43:37-43:52)

Elizabeth's delivery indirectly offended Veronica because she herself is a black woman. Elizabeth said the lipstick is only suitable for use with Veronica. The word "lovely" indirectly insults Veronica, because in its context here is a meaning that Elizabeth is not actually praising, but instead insulting it with regard to Veronica's skin, moreover Elizabeth said that the lipstickdid not match her white skin.

G. Data 07

In this scene we are directed to the situation where Veronica is a speaker at an event, behind her is a large screen that highlights her identity along with a photo and the familiar TED TALK logo. Veronica talks about blacks equality that are discussed in her book.

Veronica henley : "that black people ,....black women in particulary , we're expected to be seen , not heard..." (55:27-55:31)

The phrase that Veronica emphasizes is especially for black women. they seem to be forced to exist, but everything about them, their statements, their rights are never heard, never respected and considered by white people. Their nature is superior, they think they are the most deserving of everything, this is what Veronica tries to convey to the audience, about her feelings, about the life of black people with white people.

H. Data 08

Continuing the scene when Veronica is a speaker at TED TALK about the launch of her book (The Coping Persona) where Veronica again states about the lack of equal rights from the white race to the black race.

Veronica : we continue to get branded as the "ANGRY BLACK WOMAN" (55:42-55:45)

Veronica's words explain that white people continue to think of black women as angry women, white people feel that black women are too sensitive to everything, even though whatever criticism or label given to them is not trivial, black people's rights are being toyed with at stake and ignored. Of course this invites anger, discomfort over the feelings of black people. This racism continues to grow and develope in the country, related expressions are known and used for black people.

I. Data 09

Veronica Henley : we risk being perceived, "as threatening , to the patriarchy" (56:14-56:16)

In this scene, Veronica emphasizes that white people act as patriarchal which is Perhaps the most persistent and widespread theory around the Women's Movement today is that of patriarchy. It takes many different forms but the ideas behind it – that male domination or sexism is something which exists not just as a product of capitalism but as something quite separate from the capitalist mode of production and which will endure beyond capitalism – are accepted so widely that a wholesale rejection of the theory is greeted with complete and genuine amazement. Such theories contain little understanding of how women's oppression and the nature of the family have changed historically. Nor is there much notion of how widely differing that oppression is from class to class. Instead we are presented with the "eternal truth" that "patriarchy" in one form or another is the cause of women's oppression. The patriarchal social system makes men have special rights over women. The dominance that Veronica asserts does not only cover the personal realm, but is also devoted to the race, rights and social

appearance of black people, more specifically black women. This patriarchal culture is the root of the emergence of various violence that is addressed by men to a woman because they feel they have the right to be more powerful and do things as they please.

J. Data 10

It has entered the last part, in this scene shows where Eden/Victoria managed to escape from the plantation, but she was chased by Elizabeth, while Eden was hiding Elizabeth also said words that demeaned Eden.

Elizabeth : Eden!..

You're not gonna get out of here alive. Now, why can't you just accept that?
Accept what you are. You are nothin'. You ain't nothin', but a cotton picker.
You think you're better than us, but you ain't better than me, you fuckin' cunt!
(1:34:18-1:34:46)

The words demeaning Eden as a black woman, emphasizing that she is not commensurate with the white people like her, cannot be better than them.

Conclusion

Based on all of findings and discussions, the researcher concluded this data that has been collected and also classified is associated with some existing theory and analyzed by using descriptive qualitative data. In real life, we know that the ideology of white supremacy is a stubborn adversary, able to multiply and thrive across oceans, across nations, across time. If only eradicating anti-Blackness was as simple as burning down the master's house, as though fire could deliver a cleansing baptism. We live in a world where a Black woman can be fatally shot by the police [11] in her own apartment, those responsible for her death are only punished with a light slap on the wrist, and her death becomes a social spectacle. Like the issues involving antiracism reading lists and book clubs, watching *Antebellum* demands a certain amount of labor that's not necessarily benefiting those who need to undertake the burden. Isolated elements of *Antebellum* make the film seem like a clever metamorphosis of the traditional slave narrative, but it's less about Black people surviving white supremacy and more about offering a self-conscious and heavy-handed call to action for people who need to be enlightened. Certainly, there's value in reading literature and studying art that makes us uncomfortable. Growth is often painful. And certainly, Black people aren't a monolith. Some may find the film to be a lightning bolt of truth, a barbed yet necessary reminder of not only the past but what's currently at stake in this time of social and political uprise. The United States repeats its traumas because it suffers from collective amnesia. However, *Antebellum* doesn't develop any one character enough to explore nuances. Instead of leaving viewers with a revelatory observation about the nature of whiteness and the future of its permanent demise,

the film feels more like a reminder of the weight of our exhaustion; a reminder that resilience can sometimes be a Black woman's undoing.

Conflict of Interest

We declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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