

## Systemic Racism and Black Resilience in *Emancipation* (2022)

Michael Aaron Firmansyah Taroreh

Universitas Pamulang

Email: aarontaroreh@gmail.com

### Abstract

*This study critically examines racial discrimination in Emancipation (2022) and its impact on the protagonist, Peter. Directed by Antoine Fuqua, the film portrays the brutal injustices inflicted upon enslaved Black individuals within a system dominated by white supremacy. Employing a qualitative approach, this research analyzes selected dialogues and significant scenes, applying Joe R. Feagin's (2006) theory of systemic racism to interpret the film's representation of racial oppression. The findings demonstrate that racism in the film is depicted not merely as an isolated historical cruelty but as a deeply entrenched structural system embedded in social, cultural, political, and religious institutions. The narrative illustrates how systemic racism operates through violence, dehumanization, forced labor, and ideological domination. Furthermore, the film highlights both the physical suffering and psychological trauma experienced by Black individuals under slavery. However, the portrayal at times risks centering Peter's experience primarily as personal trauma rather than fully expanding the critique toward the broader institutional mechanisms that sustained racial oppression. Ultimately, Emancipation contributes meaningfully to contemporary discussions on racial injustice. It exposes the harsh realities of systemic oppression while simultaneously portraying resilience, faith, and the enduring struggle for freedom. Through Peter's journey, the film engages with the complexities of Black endurance and resistance within an oppressive racial order.*

**Keywords:** *Black suffering, injustice, racial oppression, systemic racism.*

### A. Introduction

Racism remains one of the most persistent and urgent social problems in contemporary society. Although many countries promote equality and human rights, racial discrimination continues to shape social interactions, institutional practices, and power relations. Acts of racism frequently target minority groups, particularly Black communities, who have historically experienced systemic marginalization. A striking example occurred in May 2020 with the death of George Floyd in the United States, an incident that sparked the global Black Lives Matter movement and renewed international attention to racial injustice. Floyd's death exposed the enduring legacy of racial discrimination embedded within American institutions and highlighted how historical patterns of oppression continue to influence present-day realities. This event demonstrates that racism remains a

significant barrier to social harmony and justice.

Another tragic case that intensified discussions of racial inequality was the death of Eric Garner in 2014. As reported by *The Guardian*, Garner, an African American man, died after being placed in a prohibited chokehold by a New York City police officer during an arrest for allegedly selling loose cigarettes. Video footage showed Garner repeatedly saying, “I can’t breathe,” words that later became a powerful slogan in protests against police brutality. The decision not to indict the officer involved generated widespread public outrage and deepened concerns about accountability within the criminal justice system. Garner’s death became a catalyst for global debates about excessive force, institutional bias, and systemic racism. These cases reveal how racial discrimination is not limited to individual prejudice but is often embedded in legal, political, and social structures.

Historically, racism has been rooted in ideologies that justify inequality. Soderlund (2005) explains that the exploitation of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade was driven by ethnocentrism and beliefs in racial hierarchy. Similarly, Schaefer (2008) argues that colonial systems constructed narratives portraying white individuals as superior while dehumanizing Black people as inferior, unintelligent, or incapable. These stereotypes were not accidental; they functioned to legitimize slavery, segregation, and economic exploitation. Over time, such narratives contributed to racial trauma and race-related stress that continue to affect marginalized communities. Thus, racism must be understood as a historical and structural phenomenon rather than isolated incidents of bias.

Literature and film provide powerful platforms for exploring and critiquing racial oppression. Through storytelling, artistic works can reveal the human impact of discrimination and challenge dominant narratives. One significant example is *Emancipation* (2022), directed by Antoine Fuqua. The film portrays the brutal realities of slavery in the United States, focusing on the journey of an enslaved man striving for freedom. By depicting physical violence, psychological suffering, and systemic injustice, the film illustrates how racial oppression operates within economic and political systems. It also reflects the historical roots of racial inequality and its long-lasting consequences.

Through compelling storytelling and complex characterization, Antoine Fuqua communicates important messages about resilience, resistance, and the pursuit of dignity. The film not only recounts historical events but also encourages viewers to reflect critically on contemporary racial issues. By humanizing the experiences of enslaved individuals, *Emancipation* emphasizes the moral urgency of confronting racism in all its forms.

Based on these considerations, this study focuses on examining racial oppression as represented in *Emancipation* (2022). Analyzing the film provides an opportunity to understand how systemic racism is constructed, maintained, and resisted within a historical narrative. This research applies Joe R. Feagin’s (2006) theory of Systemic Racism to explore how institutional structures, cultural narratives, and power relations shape the experiences of the characters. By

investigating the portrayal of racial oppression in the film, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of racism as both a historical legacy and an ongoing social challenge.

## **B. Method**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze racial oppression in *Emancipation* (2022), directed by Antoine Fuqua. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it focuses on interpreting meanings, experiences, and social realities represented through words, images, and narratives rather than numerical data (Ary, 2010). The research aimed to explore how racial oppression is portrayed through characters, dialogues, and visual representations in the film by applying Joe R. Feagin's theory of systemic racism (2006).

The primary data source of this study was the film *Emancipation* (2022), which depicts the struggle of an enslaved man, Peter, in the 1860s United States. The data consisted of selected dialogues, monologues, character interactions, and significant scenes that reflect racial discrimination, violence, exploitation, and resistance. Supporting data were obtained from relevant books, journal articles, and scholarly sources related to racism, systemic oppression, and film analysis.

The data collection technique involved several steps. First, the researcher watched the film repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the storyline and context. Second, important scenes and dialogues related to racial oppression were identified and transcribed. Third, the selected data were classified based on themes relevant to Feagin's systemic racism framework.

Data analysis followed Creswell's (2014) qualitative analysis procedures, including organizing the data, coding significant statements, grouping codes into broader themes, and interpreting the findings. The analysis focused on identifying patterns of systemic racism, forms of oppression, and their impact on the characters, leading to a deeper understanding of racial injustice as represented in the film.

## **C. Findings and Discussion**

In this section, the study presents the discussion of the research findings as the result of the analysis. This chapter aims to answer the research questions stated in Chapter One. It is divided into two subchapters. The first analyzes the depiction of racial oppression in *Emancipation* (2022) directed by Antoine Fuqua. The second examines how racial oppression affects the main character, Peter, in the film.

The film is set in Louisiana during the American Civil War and opens with Peter, an enslaved man, being forcibly separated from his family and sent to a Confederate labor camp. In this setting, Peter experiences and witnesses severe cruelty, violence, and systematic dehumanization inflicted by his captors. The labor camp functions as a representation of institutionalized racial oppression, where Black individuals are treated as property and subjected to forced labor without basic

human rights.

Peter's hope is rekindled when he learns about President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which declares enslaved people in Confederate states legally free. Motivated by the desire to reunite with his wife and children, Peter escapes from the camp. His escape triggers a relentless pursuit led by Fassel, a ruthless slave catcher. Throughout his journey across dangerous swamplands, Peter faces starvation, wild animals, physical exhaustion, and constant threats to his life. Despite these hardships, he maintains his determination, faith, and strong will to survive.

The climax occurs when Peter reaches Union-occupied territory and joins the Union Army to fight against the Confederacy and the system of slavery. During a medical examination, a photograph of his severely scarred back is taken. This image later circulates widely and becomes a powerful symbol of the brutality of slavery.

In the resolution, the Union Army defeats the Confederate forces in Louisiana and liberates enslaved individuals. Peter is eventually reunited with his family. His journey symbolizes not only physical freedom but also resilience, courage, and the enduring struggle for human dignity and liberation.

### **Racial oppression depicted in the Emancipation (2022)**

This section of the analysis examines the portrayal of Peter, the main character in Antoine Fuqua's film *Emancipation*. It begins by exploring how racial oppression escalates to the cultural and ideological level, which involves large groups, in this case, Peter, who represent the Black people facing racial oppression. It then extends to a smaller scale, showing how racial oppression manifests at the interpersonal level within close relationships and extends to Peter's experiences of racial oppression, verbal and physical, by the whites. Finally, it highlights the structural forms of racial oppression, emphasizing its presence in the economic sphere in terms of wealth inequality, in the workplace, and political systems involving the law.

### **Ideological Manipulation and Cultural Domination**

In the film *Emancipation* by Antoine Fuqua (2022), there is ideology abuse, particularly of the Christian religion, committed by the white guards in the Fassel camp; they often manipulated Christian doctrine to justify Black slavery and maintain their dominance. The Black workers in this scene, Peter, were forced to work and obey the white race. By emphasizing scriptures, the white guards in the camp even imposed that suffering was part of God's will and that submission ensured salvation by the white guard shouted, "Matthew 17:20 says that you can move a mountain, but faith without work is dead. Faith!" (Fuqua, 2022, 00:19:28 –

00:19:53).

Figure 1



Compared to the statements made by the white overseers toward Peter in Scene 1, it is evident that they exercise absolute control over the enslaved Black workers, who are forced to labor under extremely exhausting conditions. The overseers frequently shout at them and show no concern for their physical condition, even when a worker is sick or visibly fatigued. In this scene, the camera positions Peter and his fellow enslaved workers low to the ground, visually emphasizing their vulnerability and subjugation. A sharp focus on their faces captures their exhaustion while also highlighting their determination to endure. This cinematic technique reinforces the harsh realities of forced labor and systemic domination.

The scene also reflects how enslaved individuals were compelled to obey their masters unquestioningly, often justified through selective interpretations of Biblical teachings that emphasized submission and servitude. Although morally unjust, obedience was imposed as both a social and religious obligation. According to Feagin (2006), the ideology of “your land and labor are mine” was sustained by two interconnected beliefs: a Eurocentric worldview that asserted European superiority—particularly in religion, culture, and social organization—and a xenophobic attitude that dehumanized Black individuals and Indigenous peoples. Within this framework, Black people were frequently regarded as inferior and less than fully human.

From a religious perspective, Christianity was manipulated as a tool to legitimize systemic racism. The ethnocentric belief in European religious superiority led white Europeans to consider their form of Christianity as the only true faith, positioning themselves as divinely appointed to “civilize” non-European populations. Historically, many enslaved Africans practiced traditional spiritual systems centered on ancestors, spirits, and local deities. However, the film portrays Peter as having embraced Christianity even before his enslavement, which adds complexity to his character and shapes his resilience and moral strength throughout his struggle for freedom.

Figure 2



Peter is initially portrayed in a domestic setting, encouraging his family and motivating them to remain strong in facing life’s hardships. A high camera angle

captures Peter kneeling before his wife while washing her feet, symbolizing humility, devotion, and sincerity as a husband. During this moment, Peter says, “The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid” (Fuqua, 2022, 00:03:12–00:03:20). This scene reflects Christian teachings that emphasize steadfast faith and trust in God’s protection. Unlike the white overseers who manipulate religious doctrine to justify domination, Peter’s faith is presented as a source of strength, hope, and moral grounding.

The contrast between Peter and the white guards highlights the misuse of Christianity as a tool to sustain oppressive systems. Feagin (2006) argues that historically many white Christian groups supported slavery and segregation, promoting a racial ideology that positioned whites as superior and Black people as inferior. Such distorted interpretations of scripture contradict fundamental religious principles of compassion, justice, and human dignity. Throughout the film, Peter’s faith remains consistent despite immense suffering. Even after witnessing the death of his friend and enduring relentless violence, he continues to pray and seek divine protection. In Scene 16, when other enslaved individuals begin to lose hope, Peter reassures them by saying, “God is with us” (Fuqua, 2022, 00:17:20–00:17:25). His unwavering faith becomes a form of spiritual resistance against systemic oppression.

Beyond religious justification, the film also portrays cultural racial domination. In Scene 3, Fassel asserts his authority by telling Peter, “I’m your God; you walk the earth because I let you, you are my dog now” (Fuqua, 2022, 00:24:00–00:24:25). This statement reflects extreme dehumanization and the assertion of absolute power. Although Fassel appears physically alone in the scene, the camp structure itself symbolizes white dominance, where white authorities control and surveil while Black individuals are confined, enslaved, and rendered powerless within a racially hierarchical system.

Figure 3



The statement delivered by Fassel to Peter represents an explicit expression of white supremacy, reflecting an extreme and oppressive worldview in which one racial group asserts total dominance over another. By declaring, “I’m your God,” Fassel symbolically elevates himself to a divine position, suggesting absolute authority and control over Peter’s existence. The term “God” implies omnipotence, reinforcing the ideology that white enslavers possessed unquestionable power over Black bodies and lives. This domination is visually reinforced through a wide shot that captures Fassel standing upright outside the cage, fully visible, clean, and neatly dressed, while Peter remains confined and physically degraded. The visual contrast emphasizes racial hierarchy and class superiority, positioning whiteness as powerful and civilized, and Blackness as subordinated and oppressed.

Feagin (2006) explains that the ideology of “patriarchism” was deliberately promoted by white slave-owning elites, particularly Southern planters, to construct a social order centered on white male authority. Within this system, the white patriarch was positioned as the natural leader of economic, political, social, and religious institutions. By framing this hierarchy as divinely ordained or “God-given,” patriarchy legitimized slavery, racial oppression, and systemic inequality. Fassel’s declaration embodies this patriarchal logic, where domination is justified as natural and absolute.

Furthermore, Fassel’s use of the term “dog” to describe Peter intensifies the process of dehumanization. By reducing Peter to the status of an animal, Fassel symbolically strips him of dignity, identity, and humanity. A close-up shot of Peter’s dirt-covered and exhausted face visually reinforces his vulnerability and apparent powerlessness within the system. Although externally subdued and forced to obey, this degradation reflects the broader cultural and religious conditioning imposed upon enslaved Black individuals to maintain white dominance.

Another scene further illustrates racial dehumanization. When Peter attempts to help an exhausted friend struggling to carry wood, a white guard intervenes and points a gun directly at him, forcing both men to continue working. The guard states, “You hard to hear, I say when someone needs help” (Fuqua, 2022, 00:13:00–00:13:15). This moment highlights how even basic compassion is prohibited under the oppressive system, demonstrating how white authority regulates not only labor but also human interaction among enslaved individuals.

Figure 4



As depicted in Scene 4, when Peter confronts the guard who reprimands him for helping his exhausted friend, he is treated with clear condescension by the white authority figure. This interaction reflects the concept of “cultural inferiority,” in which Black individuals are positioned as naturally subordinate within a racially hierarchical system. The guard accuses Peter of being deaf by stating, “You are hard to hear,” after ordering him to return to work. This remark is not merely an insult but a rhetorical strategy used to belittle Peter and assert dominance.

The cinematic technique further reinforces this hierarchy. A low camera angle from below captures Peter looking upward toward the white guard, visually emphasizing the power imbalance. This angle positions the guard as dominant and superior, while Peter appears diminished and powerless. Costume design also highlights class and racial disparity: the guard wears clean, structured clothing symbolizing authority and order, whereas Peter’s dirty and tattered garments reflect

forced labor, deprivation, and marginalization. Together, these visual elements underscore how racial hierarchy is normalized within the film's social structure.

Feagin (2006) explains that the portrayal of enslaved African Americans historically reflected what he calls the "white racial frame," a dominant ideological system that reinforced beliefs in white superiority and Black inferiority. Discrimination was not simply the result of isolated prejudice but was embedded within a broader cultural and institutional framework. This racial frame shaped perceptions, justified exploitation, and legitimized unequal treatment across economic, social, and political domains.

Cultural and ideological racism, as illustrated in this scene, constructs enduring stereotypes and social norms that influence interpersonal interactions. These ingrained beliefs inform attitudes and behaviors, forming the foundation of everyday racism. In turn, repeated discriminatory actions reinforce and perpetuate cultural racism, normalizing inequality and sustaining systemic oppression across generations.

### **The White Racial Frame and Physical Attacks**

In *The Emancipation* (2022), directed by Antoine Fuqua, social segregation is portrayed as a foundational aspect of the system of slavery, which is part of interpersonal racism; the white guard used the verbal element of "White racial frame" to Peter as the Black character to maintain their racial hierarchies and reinforce the subjugation of Black people around using the as in the following discussion.

In the opening film, scene 5. Peter is praying with his family at home; a group of white men abruptly and violently seizes him. When Peter tries to resist by biting one of the guards, the guard reacts by angrily yelling, "Damn, animal bit me!" (Fuqua, 2022, 00:05:24–00:05:29), using the term "animal" to dehumanize Peter and reinforce a white racial framing.

It demonstrates how Peter's instant resistance, biting the arm of the white guard, immediately results in a negative framing that the white guard shouts through the word "animal". The guard consciously uses this term to express his anger and dehumanize Peter, labelling him as an "animal". This choice of language reflects the historical perception of Black people as inferior, likening them to animals, which are considered a lower caste than humans.

Figure 5



The medium shots focus on the struggle between Peter and the guards. It captures the intensity of the physical confrontation while still allowing the viewer to observe the surrounding environment; the slightly tilted angle conveys tension and instability, enhancing the chaotic nature of the moment. It seems that Peter is restrained by multiple white men, symbolizing the systemic oppression he faces. Despite being physically outnumbered, his resistance disrupts their control, showing his inner strength and unwillingness to be broken. In the background of the scene, enslaved individuals are being transported in a cage-like wagon, reinforcing the brutal reality of slavery. This scene portrays Peter's physical resilience against white oppressors. Despite being treated as less than human, his act of fighting back no matter how small represents a more significant resistance against the oppressive system of slavery.

The stereotyping of Black people as animals is a deeply ingrained and dehumanizing form of racism that has been perpetuated throughout history. The whites believed that Black people were inferior to them. This harmful framing has been used to support slavery, colonialism, segregation, and systemic racism by denying Black people their humanity and equal status in society; the portrayal of animals serves as a powerful visual metaphor, subtly reinforcing themes of stereotyping and dehumanization. This stereotype portrays Black individuals as less than human, equating them to animals to justify discrimination, exploitation, and violence.

#### **D. Conclusion**

In conclusion, *Emancipation* (2022), directed by Antoine Fuqua, presents a powerful and unsettling depiction of systemic racism as a deeply rooted structure embedded within economic, political, social, and cultural systems. The film illustrates that racial oppression is not merely an act of individual prejudice but an organized and institutionalized system that sustains inequality. Through the character of Peter and other enslaved Black individuals, the narrative reveals how systemic racism operates to dehumanize, exploit, and marginalize racial minorities while reinforcing the dominance of white power structures.

The experiences portrayed in the film demonstrate both the physical brutality and psychological trauma inflicted upon Black people under slavery. Violence, forced labor, and dehumanization are shown not as isolated incidents but as integral components of a broader racial system. By applying Joe R. Feagin's theory of systemic racism (2006), this study confirms that oppression functions across interconnected institutions, shaping access to rights, opportunities, and social mobility. The effects of such systems are long-lasting, influencing generations and continuing to shape racial disparities in contemporary society.

Although this study provides an analysis of racial oppression in the film, it remains limited. Future research may further examine Peter's resilience as a form of resistance and explore how the film constructs American identity through the historical legacy of slavery and racial violence. Ultimately, *Emancipation* serves as

a significant cultural text that reminds audiences of the enduring struggle for freedom, justice, and equality, while encouraging deeper reflection on the ongoing fight against systemic racial injustice.

## Reference

- Andiany. (2024). Fighting oppression: Racism in Angie Thomas' *On the come up*. *Morphosis: Journal of Literature*, 6(1), 7–14. <https://openjournal.unpam.ac.id/index.php/MPS/article/view/38576>
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., Sorensen, C., & Walker, D. (2010). *Introduction to research in education* (8th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Bordwell, D. (2006). *The way Hollywood tells it: Story and style in modern movies*. University of California Press.
- Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2006). *Film art: An introduction*. McGraw-Hill.
- Canini, L., Benini, S., & Leonardi, R. (2011). Affective analysis on patterns of shot types in movies. In *Proceedings of the 7th International Symposium on Image and Signal Processing and Analysis* (pp. 253–258). <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/6046615>
- Corres Sarría, L. (2015). *The influence of camera angle in film narratives*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23950.69444>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Devyana, N., & Nugroho, A. (2024). An analysis of discrimination and its effect in *Elemental* (2023) movie. *International Journal of Research on English Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 5(1), 42–52.
- Dise, J. (2016). *Filmmaking 101: Camera shot types*. <https://www.bhphotovideo.com/explora/video/tipsandsolutions/filmmaking-101-camera-shot-types>
- Feagin, J. R. (2006). *Systemic racism: A theory of oppression*. Taylor & Francis.
- Fromm, E. (2019). On the feeling of powerlessness. *Psychoanalysis and History*, 21(3), 311–329. <https://doi.org/10.3366/pah.2019.0310>
- Glatch, S. (2023, November 17). What is the plot of a story? Plot structures & devices. <https://writers.com/what-is-the-plot-of-a-story>

- Meyer, C. (2020). *Storytelling & the writer's craft* (Chapter 4: Setting). Pearson Education Inc.
- Nukem4747. (2022, December 9). *Emancipation (2022) | Action, thriller*. IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12530246/>
- Pramaggiore, M., & Wallis, T. (2007). *Film: A critical introduction* (2nd ed.). Laurence King Publishing.
- Purba, et al. (2022). Analysis of violence racism in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. *Journal of Applied, Social, and Education Studies*, 3.
- Schaefer, R. T. (2008). *Encyclopedia of race, ethnicity, and society*. Sage Publications.
- Soderlund, J. R. (2005). Creating a biracial society, 1619–1720. In W. G. Shade & W. R. Scott (Eds.), *Essays on African American history, culture and society* (pp. 55–65). Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.
- The Guardian. (2019, July 16). Eric Garner: No charges against white police officer over chokehold death. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jul/16/eric-garner-death-new-york-no-charges>
- The New York Times. (2020, May 31). How George Floyd was killed in police custody. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>
- Wardana, et al. (2023). *Green Book* movie: Portrayal of racism in America. *Journal of English Literature and Linguistic Studies*, 2(3).
- Wolff, A., Mulholland, P., & Collins, T. (2013). Storyscope: Using theme and setting to guide story enrichment from external data sources. In *Proceedings of the 24th ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media* (pp. 79–88). <https://doi.org/10.1145/2481492.2481501>