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### History Repeats Itself

The United States and Haiti have a long history together with many ups and downs. While the US has seen Haiti as a strategic ally in the past against Cuba, it has also been a small country that America has used for its own benefits and purposes exclusively. In *Bitter Cane*, the documentary explores the exploitation of American coffee capitalism on cheap and underpaid labor of the Haitian people. In this paper, I argue that the US-Haitian relations explored in the documentary are important because the history between the two countries repeats itself due to the mindset of Americans taking the Haitian resources and land as they believe it's theirs while the Haitian government lets it happen; and it shows how Americans prefer their comfy lifestyle over the well-being of the Haitians.

Firstly, I will be talking about how the mindset of Americans thinking that they have a right to Haitian land and resources and how the Haitian government that exploits its own country and citizens are historically relevant in regards to how out of touch and unaware they are to the problems in Haiti causing history to repeat itself in *Bitter Cane*. In the documentary *Bitter Cane*, there is a part near the beginning where American Marine Captain John Houston Craig is mentioned as saying "I am an honest imperialist. I believe we had a perfect right to go into Haiti but I often blush at the transparent maneuvers to which we resorted to make it appear that the

Haitians were accomplishing their own regeneration in accordance with democratic principles.”(*Bitter Cane*). There is this entitled attitude that the U.S. Marines have towards a land that isn’t theirs inherently, yet they act as if it were made for them to conquer and own. Even though the occupation of the U.S. Marines happened in 1915, exploitation, oppression and violence are the tactics still being used to take advantage of Haiti for America’s own selfish desires in more modern times as seen in the aforementioned documentary with coffee exportation from Haiti in the 1980’s. Nothing has changed except for the reasons to exploit and oppress as seen when John Craig talks about the American sanctions by part of the Haitian government and how “it turned over to American control almost the entire revenue of the republic”( *Bitter Cane*). This, in turn, mirrors what American and other foreign companies are doing to Haiti when it comes to coffee and how most of the Haitian people involved in coffee production are at the mercy of coffee economics as seen when a Haitian lady states “I’ve never seen a factory owned by a Haitian. Foreigners own all the factories here. They come here looking for higher profits for us to do the work. It’s cheaper because they pay us less so they make more profits off of us”( *Bitter Cane*). The Haitian government also has a part in this exploitation of Haiti, its people, and its resources as seen when they allowed and approved of the American sanctions during the American military occupation as well as making it easier for American companies to enter the country with little to no taxes. The Haitian government and Inter-American Development Bank make it so companies don’t have to pay taxes for the first 9 years. This, in turn, with how “there are no restrictions on the repatriation of capital”( *Bitter Cane*) in Haiti makes it so companies can get all of the profits without having to give anything back to Haiti or its workforce. These events throughout Haiti’s history with the US shows that even though the occupation of the American

military has been over for decades, the same behavior and attitude shown by the marines are still being acted upon in Haiti albeit for different reasons which portrays that even if Americans do care, they do nothing to change their lifestyles.

The reasons for why Americans are stubborn when it comes to giving up their lifestyle and exploitation of Haiti are because they like convenience and comfort over everything else. That is why they do nothing to change anything even if they do care and want change to happen. An example of this type of attitude happens in the documentary when one of the Haitian field workers explains how it is working everyday, “The rich guys don't come out in the field and get caught by the sun of the cane, they stay at home and have all sorts of witch things like iced water, they eat rich food to fatten their flesh. Border skin cutters, we work all day in the cane field and when we go homes our bellies are empty. You get up tomorrow morning it's the same thing, you're hungry, how can you live unless you eat? And then all day you're under the hot sun, it's murder”(*Bitter Cane*). Having the privilege to be able to not have to suffer under the sun working all day is something that American enterprises and businessmen try to avoid because life is easier and more comfortable that way, although it is at the expense of others doing that work for them at cheaper costs. Even if, deep down inside the people who run the businesses that exploit Haiti for its resources and labor feel guilty or show a bit of sympathy, they continue to live this lifestyle and continue to force the Haitian citizens to work for low wages because it makes the lives of American businesses easier and because addressing the problem or trying to help them would make them feel even more guilty. It would make them address their own issues and what they're doing to the Haitian people and the Haitian environment as well as accepting the fact that what they are doing is severely harming the earth and poorer countries at the

expense of the rich, “Being eager to avoid environmental imbalance and eco-guilt may not only make people ready to believe in environmental “quick-fixes.” Importantly, it may also affect people’s readiness to perceive an imbalance, or guilt, in the first place. Realizing the environmental impact of one’s own behavior is challenging, as much emotionally as cognitively. The “ostrich effect” – the tendency to selectively reject available inconvenient information, for example by ignoring the environmental impact of one’s own behavior, is a way of avoiding guilt and moral imbalance in the first place.”(Sorqvist). Those who are with the companies go through this “ostrich effect” in order to justify what they do in Haiti as well as to keep their high standard of living because it avoids the guilty conscience that weighs inside them when exploiting the Haitian working class. Ignoring what they see everyday and what they do to people who aren’t as privileged as they are makes it so much easier for them to just overlook it all. By doing this, they are able to come up with other reasons to justify their actions as seen when one man says “The American people don’t like the tedious work, they don’t like to stay at it, they don’t like to report in on time, they’re absenteeism, they’re drunk, they’re bums”(Bitter Cane). Companies put the blame on the average American citizen, calling them lazy and unmotivated. This is ironic because those in charge exploit the Haitian working class in order to have a life where they don’t have to do any of that tedious work they claim working class Americans don’t want to do. The “ostrich effect” makes those in charge of big companies and organizations selectively reject any form of self-awareness or self-criticism that in turn helps them justify the companies’ actions in Haiti, ignoring their morals for more money overseas where they can exploit the working class citizens of that country and come home and never have to worry about what’s happening because it occurs in another country.

In conclusion, the history between Haiti and the United States has been one filled with lots of exploitation from the Haitian government and the Americans on the Haitian people. From American military occupation to American companies taking advantage financially and environmentally of what belongs to the Haitian people with the permission of the Haitian government, the injustices taking place in the documentary *Bitter Cane* are repeated acts of exploitation that run deep historically. I argued in this essay that Americans are unaware and out of touch with the problems that happen in Haiti because they value their comfy lifestyles over the well-being of the Haitians. I also argue that they are unaware and out of touch because of how Americans still want to express this entitled attitude of having a right to the money and resources of Haiti. Although this all happens, there are those who fight for a better future for Haiti.

Works Cited

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