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Critical Analysis/Reflection Paper

Throughout both Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* and Lockhart's article *How Slavery Became America's First Big Business*, systemic exploitation and violence are explored as being a part of the tapestry that is the development of the United States, while the film *A Bug's Life* provides a metaphorical lens to explore these themes, illustrating the dynamics of power, oppression, and resistance. Together these works highlight the role of the Indigenous experience of colonial violence, the economic system of slavery, and how these historical forces are mirrored in the themes of power and social hierarchy in the movie, revealing the lasting impact of these experiences on modern culture.

To begin, Dunbar-Ortiz sheds light on the colonial violence experienced by early Indigenous people. Ortiz explains how Indigenous people served as the very evidence of the existence of the Western Hemisphere, yet despite this, their culture was destroyed and their story replaced with a tale of heroic discovery favoring European colonists. Ortiz goes on to detail this tale by mentioning that, "...postmodernist studies insisted on Indigenous 'agency' under the guise of individual and collective empowerment, making the casualties of colonialism responsible for their own demise" (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). In the introduction to her book, Ortiz highlights the role of power and oppression. She touches on colonists' heavy reliance upon tactics of oppression such as the seizure of Indigenous lands for the sake of agricultural expansion, wealth, and resources, and actively seeking to suppress Indigenous cultural expression such as language and

traditions through early missionary efforts. A point Ortiz neglected to mention however is the power of storytelling. It is its own expression powerful to oversee the crafting of a narrative, something Indigenous people were not given the chance to do for their own experience. Colonists were able to overwhelm and overtake Indigenous people, later robbing Indigenous people of the power to convey their own narrative, resulting in the blood-stained theory of manifest destiny. This is a prime example of the corrupt usage of power, even in the early development of the United States.

Southern slave owners followed a similar blueprint of the use of oppression and the abuse of power when it came to the economic system of slavery. As P.R. Lockhart argues, enslaved labor directly ties to the United States becoming, and remaining, a leading global economy. Before cotton became the main commodity of early American economy, enslaved people worked in tobacco and rice fields or as dock workers or servants. However, Lockhart states that, "...the end of slavery in Saint-Domingue, which becomes Haiti, cuts off that demand from one of those main markets...But right at this same moment, Britain begins its process of industrialization and its focus on cotton textiles" (Lockhart 2019). The expansion of the textile market drove Southern enslavers to find more effective ways to oppress the African American population, while also keeping up with growing demand for cotton to maintain economic growth. Lockhart lightly touches on this innovation in slavery when she mentions that in the late 18th century, the US stops relying on the African Slave trade and more on the birth of African American children, so they might be raised as slaves to replace those who had died. Lockhart's analysis of economic slavery highlights the dehumanization of the African American population in the name of economic growth, and the ability and willingness of Southern slave owners to thrust the responsibility of the development of a country onto the weary and beaten backs of slaves.

The suffering of both the Indigenous and African American cultures has rippling effects on even modern society. A perfect example of this is the film *A Bug's Life* and the metaphorical lens that is utilized to further explore these themes of oppression and perceived social hierarchy. Throughout the film, the viewer is introduced to the social order of this society of bugs. Grasshoppers, similar to colonists and southern slave owners, have established that they are at the top of the social pyramid, and that the ants, much like Indigenous and African American people, are beneath them. The ants are forced, through the actual use, and future threats of, violence to work jobs providing resources that are determined to be essential to the grasshoppers' survival, not unlike how slaves were forced to work in fields picking cotton that had been determined to be essential to the economic survival of the early United States. Through this metaphorical lens, Hopper, the leader of the grasshoppers, expertly describes the importance of oppressive practices in both this fictional universe and the real-world system of slavery when he states, ““You let one ant stand up to us, then they all might stand up. Those puny little ants outnumber us a hundred to one. And if they ever figure that out, there goes our way of life! It's not about food. It's about keeping those ants in line”” (Walt Disney 1998). Hopper's monologue reveals the underlying truth of oppression across these different systems. The oppression was never about the people, or ants in this case. It was always about ensuring that grasshoppers, slave owners, and colonists remained on top of the social pyramid and that, although they outnumbered them, slaves, Indigenous people, and ants remained on the bottom. This fictional children's movie provides the audience with a lens through which to view the world around them and see through the skewed stories they are presented as fact.

In conclusion, the sum of Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, Lockhart's article *How Slavery Became America's First Big Business*, and Walt Disney's film *A Bug's Life* all expertly highlight the systemic exploitation, oppression, and abuses of

power utilized throughout the development of early American society, and how the ripples of these actions reach even modern culture. By utilizing the lenses provided to us through film and other forms of media, it become abundantly clear the lasting impact Indigenous and African American suffering has on the country as we know it. As briefly mentioned by Dunbar-Ortiz (2014), it is important that we avoid the, “...laziness of the default position and the trap of... manifest destiny,” and look through these lenses at the foundation of our nation so we might become aware of those who were sacrificed and overlooked in the name of prosperity.

Works Cited

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