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# Telescopic Relationality: Visualizing the Archipelagic Americas in *Burn!*

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“I don’t think there has been anything in human history quite like the meeting of Africa, Asia, and Europe in this American archipelago we call the Caribbean.”

—George Lamming, “The Caribbean Intellectual and Western Education”

“[I]t is better to know where to go and not know how than it is to know how to go and not know where.”

—Martino, quoting José Dolores,  
in *Burn!*

Benedict Anderson begins *The Spectre of Comparisons*, his 1998 collection of reflections on Southeast Asian studies, with an account of serving as a translator during President Sukarno’s acceptance of an honorary degree from the University of Indonesia in 1963. Sukarno, much to the young Anderson’s surprise, commends Hitler as a nationalist—an approach that renders both the Hitler and the Europe that Anderson knows in a strange new light. As Anderson describes, “I had been invited to see my Europe as through an inverted telescope.”<sup>1</sup> Anderson then details how he discovered “a good name for this experience” only years later when reading José Rizal’s novel *Noli Me Tangere*. In Chapter Eight, protagonist Crisóstomo Ibarra rides a carriage through Manila after a sojourn in Spain and cannot help but see “the botanical gardens of Europe” as he passes a garden in the Philippine metropolis.<sup>2</sup> Anderson explains that Ibarra “can no longer matter-of-factly experience [the gardens], but sees them simultaneously close up and from afar. The novelist arrestingly names the agent of this incurable doubled vision “*el demonio de las comparaciones*.”<sup>3</sup> Anderson translates

Rizal's "*el demonio de las comparaciones*" as "the spectre of comparisons" and mobilizes the phrase as his book's title.

Anderson's inverted telescope presents a tantalizing symbol for an experience of defamiliarization. Telescopes, of course, are optical tools that enable faraway objects to appear closer. An inverted telescope, however, makes that which is intimate or near appear to be distant and unfamiliar. That Anderson links the imagined vantage of an inverted telescope to the acute colonial mentality felt by Rizal's Ibarra speaks to a challenge of comparatist and postcolonial scholarship: a reminder of what may be lost or hierarchized when placed side by side. Following Anderson's account, then, the inverted telescope offers an example of technological insight gone awry. Rather than facilitate the closing of distance, the telescope can just as well be turned around to provide a view that reminds one of their diminished, or at least relative, position within the hierarchy implied by the relation of observer and observed.

This essay examines the radical vision of a postemancipation Caribbean depicted in the narrative feature film *Burn!* to posit an alternative mode of telescopic relationality, one where the telescope serves as a tool for envisioning possibility rather than hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> Released in 1969, *Burn!* takes place on a fictional Caribbean colony of Portugal called Queimada, and its protagonists are a white English agent of the British Admiralty (played by Marlon Brando) and a Black cane cutter turned revolutionary leader (played by first-time Afro-Colombian actor Evaristo Márquez) who exchange rum and whisky while debating the meaning of civilization. Directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, the Italian filmmaker best known for *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), *Burn!* is undoubtedly a gaze from outside the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> But I argue that the film positions the telescope within its diegesis as a provocatively paradoxical tool of sight: Characters use the optical instrument to magnify a vision of the archipelagic Americas without necessarily crystallizing the perceived image's meaning. If we extend the practice of filmmaking as a symbolic telescope in its own right, I suggest that the broader implication of *Burn!*'s telescopic relationality is, once again, seemingly counterintuitive: It is a film that shows the Caribbean and imagines what it may look like after a revolution precisely in order to emphasize the phenomena of not seeing and not knowing.

Paying heed to the telescopic relationality in *Burn!* thus reminds us—unlike recent high-profile films that depict the institution of slavery in the United States with a discernible arc to freedom such as *Django Unchained*, *Lincoln*, and *12 Years a Slave*—that as viewers, we must refold ourselves into the project of recognizing archipelagic pasts, presents, and futures. My thinking regarding viewers' engagement with film draws on that of Michelle A. Stephens on contemporary Caribbean visual art. Stephens proposes that "[t]he word string of 'arc,' 'archive,' and 'archipelago' captures ... an idea of islands as geographic gathering points for a collection or archive of experiences, subjectivities, texts, et al., shaped in significant ways by the geo-histories of islanders across both ancient and modern landscapes."<sup>6</sup> This "word string" offers a way to theorize narrative films themselves as active processes alongside the activity

of film-watching. As such, I position *Burn!* as much more than “a fictional parable of linked historical transitions.”<sup>7</sup> The film’s counterintuitive use of the telescope as a tool for vision points instead to a different kind of arc: one that implicates viewers and compels them to see islands in terms of alternative American connectivities rather than through discourses of insignificance.

### **Seeing and Not-Seeing: Visualizing the Archipelagic Americas**

The opening diegetic scene of *Burn!* features a Portuguese captain and a British Admiralty agent aboard a ship floating off the coast of Queimada. This triangulation of an explorer from the Iberian Peninsula, a representative from the British Isles, and a coastline of an imagined island in the Caribbean situates the film in a markedly noncontinental space. According to the film’s director, *Burn!*’s geographic layers were shaped by the realities of film financing: its producers, including the Italian Alberto Grimaldi, did not want the film’s colonial forces to be Spanish to avoid offering “a negative image of Spain.”<sup>8</sup> But while Spanish colonialism in the Caribbean was whitewashed in *Burn!*, the figure of the British Admiralty, embodied by Marlon Brando’s William Walker, could be read as an allegory of the North American continent’s interventions in the Caribbean in the nineteenth century. The character’s name brings to mind William Walker, a Nashville-born man who was among the most well-known mercenaries from the United States to organize expeditions in the Caribbean with the aim of destabilizing European colonial power and profiting from slavery labor.<sup>9</sup> The Walker of *Burn!*, however, is less of a romanticized hero or even antihero and more of a foil for José Dolores, the film’s Black revolutionary.

Walker’s mediating role is stressed by the telescope in the opening scene. Most of the scene is shown from the perspective of the Portuguese captain’s telescope as his voiceover dialogue introduces Walker to Queimada: “That’s your island, Queimada. One of the hundreds of islands of the Lesser Antilles. Here, have a look.” The Portuguese captain hands his telescope to Walker, and the scene goes on to provide an overview of the island’s history through the captain’s continuing voiceover narration that accompanies shots of Queimada’s landscape as visible from the coast, intercut with medium shots of the two men aboard the ship. Substantial portions of the scene are visualized through the telescope in Walker’s hands, which the film’s viewers experience thanks to rounded edges within the frame that mimic looking through a telescope’s eyepiece. The Portuguese captain describes “the wild part” of the island on its windward side, how the main port and sugar plantations are on the leeward side; and the island’s population dynamic: about five thousand whites living among a majority Black enslaved population. The captain goes on to explain that the term *queimada* means “burnt” and refers to how “the Portuguese had to burn the island to put down the resistance of the Indians when they took it,” thus necessitating importation of African labor to work on the cane fields. Walker’s telescope then looks upon a white rock, which the Portuguese captain says is the *Cemitério Branco dos*

*Negros*, a site so named because it is where the bodies of dead Africans were disposed after the trip across the Atlantic. The captain mentions that “nearly half” of the Africans died en route to the island, and furthermore, that the “exceptional whiteness” of the rock formation is a result of “the dust of their bones, which have penetrated into and merged with the rocks.”

This opening scene demonstrates how the power of vision and the telescope can be dislodged even when they are seemingly asserted. The Englishman Walker is a first-time visitor to the Portuguese colony. As the captain explains Queimada’s entwined landscape and history to Walker, viewers of *Burn!* are basically in the same position as Walker—learning about an island in the Americas while being mediated by physical lenses. But while the Portuguese captain’s voiceover narration tells a broad account of how Queimada became Queimada, the narrative is never one of triumph. Each detail mentioned in the report of the island testifies to the intractability of its landscape, the resistance of the Indigenous peoples, or the enduring presence of deceased African captives. Queimada as seen through the telescope is presented as untamed—not in the sense of savage, but rather in the sense of refusing to completely submit to colonial domination.

The dense forest of the island’s windward side and the fact that the material presence of whiteness is visually present in the dead Africans’ bones (rather than the white Portuguese minority) show to Walker and viewers alike that Queimada may economically belong to the Portuguese yet also exists as both a physical and symbolic realm that tells a more layered story of conflict and survival. The opening scene therefore introduces the colonial gaze as tenuous. The telescope serves as a tool only for seeing Queimada from a distance, not for revealing its histories. Indeed, the oral-visual configuration of the opening scene—the Portuguese captain narrating key events in Queimada’s history to Walker as the telescope’s perspective is shown—demonstrates the interdependency of technological devices and living, embodied conveyors of knowledge.

The telescope’s limited capabilities are further revealed as *Burn!* continues. Walker arrives on Queimada scheming to work with a slave rebellion that would destabilize Portuguese control of the island and facilitate a British takeover; shortly after his arrival, however, Walker is informed that Santiago, the rebellion’s leader, has been captured and executed. Walker prepares to leave Queimada but identifies another leader for a rebellion when he sees José Dolores—the cane cutter who had earlier volunteered to assist him with his bags after disembarking. Dolores catches Walker’s eye when the cane cutter seems ready to throw a large stone at a Portuguese soldier who brutishly pushes him to the ground for giving a piece of fruit to a woman in chains. In Dolores, Walker sees a force that he can manipulate for his own purposes. He thus recruits Dolores to assemble some of his fellow cane cutters in a simple plot to steal gold from Queimada’s central bank.

On a leafy hill near the coast, Walker guides the men through the plan and hands a telescope to Dolores and tells the cane cutters that they can go anywhere once

they have the gold. Dolores asks, “Even Africa?” Walker laughs and responds, “Yes, even to Africa.” The telescope is a fascinating object in this scene because—unlike in the opening scene where the film cuts to the perspective of the telescope as both the Portuguese captain and Walker use it—there is no indication of what Dolores sees when he uses the device. The camera holds Dolores in a medium shot as he looks through the telescope to a place offscreen to his right. Such framing emphasizes space around Dolores; the composition of the shot and the direction toward which he looks also serve as further contrasts to the opening scene featuring the two European men.

Where that scene involves claustrophobic shots of the Portuguese captain and Walker intercut with the telescope’s perspective and accompanied by ominous voice-over narration describing Portugal’s continuing struggle to dominate Queimada, this shot of Dolores and the telescope evokes airiness and possibility. Dolores and his fellow cane cutters in this scene are furthermore situated on a coastal hill, which provides a terrestrially grounded vantage from which to survey both Queimada’s bank and what lies beyond. The Portuguese captain and Walker, by contrast, were aboard a ship yet also adrift on the sea when using the telescope to view Queimada in the opening scene. When Dolores thus mentions Africa, he names a site of origin and anticipates a destination of possible return. But by foregrounding Africa in Dolores’s mind’s eye and leaving it offscreen, *Burn!* avoids a visual flattening of the continent and suggests how existing scopic conventions cannot accommodate Dolores’s burgeoning ambitions.

That which remains offscreen in *Burn!* is central to the film’s project of visualizing the archipelagic Americas, and Dolores enacts this visual-political practice through his conceptualizations of space. In the next scene, Dolores and Walker have drinks to celebrate their plans to rob the bank: Dolores offers Walker some of his rum, and in exchange, Walker insists that Dolores “must try” his whisky. Dolores raises his cup to toast to England, and Walker attempts reciprocity by toasting to Africa. But prior to clinking their drinking vessels together, Dolores amends his toast and says, “*e ao mundo!*” [and the world!]. Walker reiterates Dolores’s words, and the brief scene ends with both men slightly contorting their faces to suggest that they did not enjoy the other’s preferred alcoholic beverage. Dolores’s invocation of “*mundo!*” is a key moment because it offers a powerful suggestion that his ambitions exceed those that Walker has in mind for the cane cutter. Dolores, after all, expands the geographic scope of their toast, whereas Walker merely tries to replace England with Africa. The two characters contrast each other in obvious ways, which has not been lost in interpretations of the film. Neelam Srivastava, for example, see Dolores as “emblematic of Third Worldism” and a figure that symbolizes “various currents of anti-colonialism” and Walker “as the representative of colonial logic” who seeks to mold Dolores as a version of himself.<sup>10</sup> But Dolores’s toast “*e ao mundo!*” immediately following the scene where he first looks through Walker’s telescope is suggestive of a political horizon that is perhaps located even further beyond either anticolonialism on one hand and replication of colonial inequity on the other.

To draw out the enticing ambiguity of Dolores's political vision, it is crucial to contrast it with the one Walker delineates for the localized Portuguese officials governing Queimada. After guiding Dolores and other cane cutters through the bank robbery, Walker and Dolores together rally more enslaved workers to resist Portuguese rule—this time through armed violence. *Burn!* shows Walker teaching a group of enslaved men how to use a rifle; after a jump cut in the middle of the lesson, the next scene depicts a group of dead Portuguese soldiers. The camera then pans left to showcase Queimada's cane cutters dancing in celebration. The scene that follows is an extended one where Walker meets with Queimada's local administrators and makes a case for why they should respond to Black organized resistance with excitement rather than anxiety. Using a gendered and racialized metaphor of the white wife versus the "mulatto" prostitute, Walker proposes that the former—who requires ongoing shelter, food, and clothing—represents the high cost of slavery while the latter—who is "yours only when you need her" for a particular service and a fixed amount of time—shows the economic freedom that national sovereignty would bring to Queimada. Walker entices local authorities with the prospect that independence would involve "the freedom to trade with any one you want" in lieu of the vetoes and taxes that come with external domination by the Portuguese. In short, Walker makes a case for the economic advantages that would arise if Queimada were no longer a colony. He thinks within available paradigms of colony and nation, and slavery and freedom.

Dolores, by contrast, introduces the possibility that another political ontology might exist.<sup>11</sup> After one of the local elites to whom Walker spoke about independence assassinates the governor of Queimada, Dolores is invited to discuss proposals for a new constitution with the interim provisional government. Dolores initially seems eager to take on the role of a conqueror following the cane cutters' slaughter of Portuguese soldiers: He dons the coat of a dead Portuguese soldier and sits on the governor's throne upon entering the government palace. Yet Dolores is not invested in wielding power, at least not in the way Walker and the local Portuguese administration expect. Deliberations about proposals for Queimada's new constitution are not shown in the film. *Burn!* instead depicts a scene that begins after weeks of meetings in which the provisional government sits down with Dolores at a large table. After Dolores fails to approve of another proposal—it is not described—a government official named Alfonso Prada exclaims, "For a month you have been answering 'no.' Why don't you try suggesting something, General?" The scene implies that Dolores neither proposes his own additions to the constitution nor comments on suggestions made by others. Instead, he seizes upon his ability to say no, which is tantamount to his vote for a lack of confidence in the entire enterprise of enumerating and codifying laws.<sup>12</sup>

### **Telescopic Relationalities**

It is at this point that the film's story, via its spoken dialogue, transitions to a kind of didacticism yet at the same time begins to visually suggest something more powerful.

Mr. Shelton, an Englishman in the sugar industry, takes Dolores aside and informs him that Queimada's sugar is beginning to rot in storage and on the quays. This information does not prompt Dolores to accelerate any decision-making, and Shelton goes on to warn him that the cultivation of sugar from beets is already gaining ground in Europe. Once again, such information does not bother Dolores, and he asks why Shelton is even speaking to him. Because deliberations for the new constitution have been so protracted, Queimada's provisional government has expired, and Walker directs Shelton to Dolores to make an agreement with England concerning Queimada's sugar. Shelton thus asks Dolores, "How are these people to live?" and elaborates on competition and prices concerning the sugar market. Dolores steps into the foreground of the scene and tells Shelton to leave him alone. Dolores then orders one of his men to remove all the whites from the government palace. Walker realizes Dolores is beginning to envision a revolutionary course of action and so names the infrastructures Queimada needs to function—government, industry, commerce, medicine, and education—and ends his brief lecture by remarking: "Civilization is not a simple matter, José." Dolores's questioning of civilization will be foregrounded later in the film, but it is notable here that Walker addresses Dolores by his first name.

It is an act of individualizing Dolores at precisely a moment when Dolores is beginning to question the legitimacy of governance spearheaded by one person. Dolores, after all, embodies this skepticism when he arrives at the government palace wearing garments that mark status yet refrains from exercising the power that such a uniform authorizes. By furthermore using the term "civilization," Walker is giving a name to the political maneuvering underway in Queimada and ultimately reminding Dolores that civilization—in the manner that Walker practices—is a white man's game.

After these suggestive lines of dialogue, Dolores and Walker say farewell to each other and restage their gesture of exchanging drinks, toasting, and, most importantly, mapping archipelagic space. Walker is leaving Queimada to continue his work for the British Admiralty—this time in Indochina. He tells Dolores, "I don't suppose you've ever heard of Indochina." The men pour each other rum and whisky again, and Dolores proposes a toast to Indochina. But Walker raises his cup and says, "To those who cut the cane," an empty gesture given how he earlier marked civilization as a white man's exclusive enterprise that nevertheless relies on the labor of Black cane cutters. Dolores does not repeat Walker's toast in the same way Walker echoed "*e ao mundo!*" in the earlier scene. Instead, Dolores recognizes the tension of interdependence in Walker's political dismissal of Black self-determination on one hand and his desire to champion those same Black laborers in his toast and replies to Walker, "[r]ight, or there'd be no sugar for your tea." I read Dolores's line here as a continuation of his silent standoff during the deliberations on Queimada's new constitution. He grasps now, perhaps more than ever, that the work of cane cutters is the very basis for the thriving global sugar market that enmeshes Caribbean islands such as Queimada with European consumers. As Michael T. Martin points out in his reading of *Burn!*, the plantation is where "larger economic and political struggles are



signified and narrated.”<sup>13</sup> But where Martin reads the film as “exploiting the cinematic conventions of the ‘action’ genre” in order for Pontecorvo to stage “a psycho-historical drama,” I want to foreground again the idea of the telescope as a framework for understanding *Burn!*.

Once Walker leaves for Indochina, it becomes more apparent that the narrative core of *Burn!* as well as Dolores’s political vision are that which the telescope—extended to include the film itself—cannot see. The narrative suddenly cuts ahead ten years in time and situates viewers not in Queimada or Indochina, but on the floor of the London Stock Exchange. An unidentified, disembodied voiceover narration informs viewers that sugar companies have merged into the powerful Antilles Royal Sugar Corporation. Reminiscent of the East India Company, the Antilles Royal Sugar Corporation now controls “law and order” on its plantations as a result of its consolidated power. Viewers eventually learn that government officials in Queimada want Walker—now an advisor to the Antilles Royal Sugar Corporation—to return to the island and negotiate with Dolores following a decade of economic and social upheavals.

Rather than depict these upheavals in detail, *Burn!* abbreviates and assembles them into a montage—a possible filmic allusion to Sergei Eisenstein, a filmmaker also interested in revolutionary subjects. When Walker is back in Queimada addressing local administrators, his words become voiceover narration during a sequence that flashes back to three key events: in May 1845, Dolores agrees to dissolve his army and Queimada becomes a republic; in 1847, the new republic cedes to the Antilles Royal Sugar Corporation the “right of exploitation of the sugar plantations” for ninety-nine years; and in 1848—a year with obvious ties to revolution—Queimada’s cane cutters enter the city and set it ablaze. Dolores’s army also reorganizes, prompting England to send military forces to the island. What is visually striking at this juncture in the film is not the montage itself, but rather Dolores’s absence from the scenes as well as many more to follow.

In a scene that I read as the core articulation of Dolores’s politics and *Burn!*’s play with the technology of the telescope, Walker apprehends and questions a man named Martino—essentially a surrogate for Dolores. Though Dolores is not physically present in the scene, he is able to confront and speak to Walker insofar as Martino quotes his words. Martino says, “Now, José Dolores says: ‘That if what we have in our country is civilization—civilization of white men—then we are better uncivilized because it is better to know where to go and not know how than it is to know how to go and not know where.’” Dolores’s words here are of course directly responding to Walker’s earlier warning that civilization is not a “simple matter.” Yet what also stands out about Dolores’s words is how they link back to the moment in the film where Dolores looks through Walker’s telescope in preparation for the bank robbery.

That scene already visually suggested Dolores’s political vision (again, by *not* showing it), which Martino directly explains to Walker at this later stage of the film. Dolores knows where to go—presumably Africa, since he names the continent to

Walker as a potential destination after the bank robbery—yet he never purports to possess the knowledge needed to reach that destination. That scene’s refusal to show the perspective of Dolores’s telescope also stresses the “better” and “uncivilized” situation of knowing “where to go” while not “know[ing]” how. The visual flow in the scene between Martino and Walker—that is, Dolores speaking to Walker through Martino—foregrounds how Dolores is practicing a politics that embodies itself not in an ostensible leader, but in the people broadly considered.

Similarly, Dolores’s physical disappearance from much of the film following Walker’s return to Queimada suggests an analogous relationship of flow and relationality between onscreen heroes and quotidian audiences. As a film, *Burn!* does not depict what a postemancipation society looks like. That organized resistance is represented only in compressed form in a short montage is not a failure of the film; instead, such a turning away from the *visual* capabilities of the narrative film form should be read as a significant highlighting of the *political* possibilities of the medium.

To flesh out this claim, it is necessary to note how the telescope explicitly reenters the narrative as a tool of distortion. Walker asks Martino to deliver a flask of whisky to Dolores; Dolores, however, refuses it. Walker subsequently becomes fixated on tracking down Dolores and turns to his telescope. It is only at this late stage in the film that the telescope takes on a decidedly colonial connotation: Walker uses the telescope to gaze upon a group of freedom fighters ascending a rocky mountainside and sees Dolores. Crucially, Dolores is no longer wearing colorful military garments; he is in tattered, practical clothing—thus again erasing yet also disseminating himself by folding into the collective. Soon after, Walker gives his telescope to a British soldier to point out Dolores and says to him, “[a] fine specimen, isn’t he?” Now that Dolores has indeed departed from the path Walker envisioned for him, it becomes apparent that Walker never considered Dolores an equal despite their fraternal moments with whisky and rum.

The diegetic narrative of *Burn!* concludes with Dolores presumably being hanged (notably, another offscreen event) following his capture, while the fate of Queimada remains uncertain. But just as the telescope reappears when Walker finds Dolores, echoing the opening scene where the Portuguese captain welcomes Walker to Queimada through the perspective of a telescope, the film also restages the initial meeting of Dolores and Walker when the former asked the latter if he could assist with his luggage. As Walker walks toward a ship to leave Queimada, an offscreen voice asks, “[y]our bags, senhor?” Walker turns around with a grin on his face, but his countenance quickly turns to one of pain: He is stabbed by an Afro-Queimadan. Walker had warned the local administrators of Queimada that individuals such as Toussaint Louverture and Dolores can “become very dangerous” because while they can “ignite” instability in a manner that can then be manipulated by European powers, their mythic afterlives problematize the project of “civilization.” The smile on Walker’s face as he turns to the man who asks to assist with his bags indicates that Walker did not grasp Dolores’s dedication to revolution until he felt his murderer’s knife puncture

his stomach. The lesson illuminated by Dolores's army here is that perhaps it is not civilization that fails to be simple—rather, it is civilization's unforeseeable alternatives that pose the most complex challenge to the present moment.

*Burn!* thus ends with Walker dying and the implication that Dolores's revolutionary spirit is spreading. That the final scene of the film is actually a nondiegetic one pushes the idea of the narrative as imaginative-political process: Queimada's cane cutters—now Dolores's army—look not into the camera but beyond it as Ennio Morricone's portentous musical score plays. The collective gaze of the Afro-Queimadans in this scene extends past the camera to simultaneously remind viewers they are watching a film and to bridge the realms of *Burn!*'s narrative and the world beyond the frame. The brief scene, which turns into the backdrop for the film's concluding title card, also works as a remarkable counterpoint to *Burn!*'s opening scene that triangulated the telescope, the Portuguese captain, and Walker/the audience. The opening scene does not wield the telescope with confidence; indeed, the telescope is used more out of caution, in order to underline the distance that imperial forces must maintain from Queimada.

In contrast therefore to the meditated, insecure gaze of the telescope in the opening scene, the film's final moment of visibility centers people without the accompaniments of voiceover narration, particularized characters, or the presence of a tool for seeing aside from the camera involved in the production of the scene. By concluding with attention to Queimada's anonymous freedom fighters after already having centered its histories as well as sea- and landscapes at the outset of the narrative, *Burn!* tasks viewers with the project of continuing to fashion an alternative to the "civilization" of capitalism. If the film's opening scene constrains Queimada—and by extension, the histories of colonialism, slavery, and resistance in the Caribbean more broadly—through the defensive tool of the Portuguese captain's telescope, *Burn!*'s choice to leave Dolores offscreen for much of its final third and to highlight a selection of the Black revolutionary masses upon its conclusion offers a visual grammar for viewers to consider the "sovereignty of their imaginations" when engaging with the telescopes of filmmaking.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

As detailed above, *Burn!* centers visibility through its self-conscious attention to the telescope while at the same time remaining open to the possibility of that which lies beyond both the telescope's perspective and filmic representation. The film's narrative furthermore stitches together the histories of nineteenth-century postemancipation upheavals in the Caribbean and its own contemporary context of movements for self-determination in Vietnam. Perhaps these strategies of patent fictionalization—highlighting the telescope's power not merely for seeing but for seeing possibilities that remain offscreen and weaving together expansive geographical histories that do not neatly fit into continental parameters—partly explain why *Burn!* has failed to

capture the kind of cultural and critical attention given to *The Battle of Algiers*, the film Pontecorvo directed only three years prior. Where that film won the prestigious Golden Lion prize at the Venice Film Festival, reentered popular consciousness when the United States Department of Defense screened it to impart counterterrorism tactics to US troops in Iraq in 2003, and joined the Criterion Collection library in 2004, *Burn!* is unavailable on streaming services and hard to find new on DVD. Another reason why *The Battle of Algiers* has been more thoroughly appreciated are its links to Frantz Fanon's watershed anticolonial text *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in French five years prior, in 1961. Fanon's assertion that "decolonization is always a violent event" precisely because of colonization's violence easily maps onto *The Battle of Algiers*, which depicts FLN resistance to French occupation of Algeria.<sup>15</sup>

George Lamming—another Caribbean intellectual and contemporary of Pontecorvo—can help us grasp the archipelagic relations highlighted in *Burn!* that have been lost to viewers and critics amid dominant conventions of continental approaches and postcolonial studies. In *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Lamming's collection of essays best known for contemplating the Caribbean writer in post-World War II London, the Barbadian novelist also figures American space in a fascinating way. He calls America "one island only" alongside the other "islands" that have informed the Caribbean: Africa, India, and China.<sup>16</sup> But most relevant for my archipelagic reading of *Burn!* and what the telescope cannot see are the moments where Lamming recasts America from the Caribbean vantage as a space of possibility. When Lamming reflects on the publication of *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), his first novel, he describes the anxious excitement he felt as a colonized subject of the British Empire awaiting critical response from the literary establishment in England. Lamming cites such anxiety as a key example of how the myth of British superiority works for colonized subjects. By contrast, such expectations have not yet accumulated toward America; as Lamming bluntly puts it, "[i]n a sense, America does not even exist."<sup>17</sup> And later in *The Pleasures of Exile* when Lamming comments on the magnetic pull that C. L. R. James feels toward Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), he expands on the idea of America as a not-yet terrain of possibility for the Caribbean:

The West Indies are lucky to be where they are: next door to America, not the America of the Mason-Dixon line or the colonising policies in the guise of freedom and self-defence, not the America that is afraid of the possibilities of its own strength. It's a different America that the West Indies can explore. It's the America that started in a womb of promise, the America that started as an alternative to the old and privileged Prospero, too old and too privileged to pay attention to the needs of his own native Caliban. In the Caribbean we are no more than island peaks; but our human content bears a striking

parallel with that expectation upon which America was launched in the result, if not the method, of its early settlement. (152)

Perhaps this “different America” that Lamming envisions is what Dolores sees when he looks through Walker’s telescope as they prepare for the bank robbery. Lamming may describe the Caribbean as “no more than island peaks,” but it is precisely from such elevated earth formations that the sea is discernible as a connective materiality to terrains that do not appear to the naked eye. This might explain why, over thirty years after *The Pleasures of Exile*, in the essay from which I draw my opening epigraph, Lamming would maintain his attention to the African, Asian, and European layers of the Caribbean while describing it as an “American archipelago.”<sup>18</sup>

The telescopic relationality that *Burn!* presents, both diegetically with Dolores’s engagements with the telescope and nondiegetically through its visual implication of viewers, thus resonates with the tension between “the metaphoric and the material” that Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens identify as one of the productive paradoxes in turning to the heuristic of the archipelago “to mediate the phenomenology of humans’ cultural relation to the solid and liquid materiality of geography.”<sup>19</sup> Film, after all, is a material medium that largely draws on suturing—editing techniques often intended to make audiences forget that they are watching a constructed narrative—to tell a story. If *Burn!* denies viewers access to what Dolores glimpses when he looks through the telescope, it in turn opens audiences to a way of relating to both narrative film and American geographies where the most urgent spectacle is not that which is onscreen. What is left offscreen invites viewers to contemplate their own lived political realities in a postemancipation archipelagic America that is attempting to—as suggested in Dolores’s words—navigate to a place of sovereignty without exactly knowing how.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), 2.

<sup>2</sup> José Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere*, trans. Harold Augenbraum (1887; reprint, New York: Penguin, 2006), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, 2, emphasis in original.

<sup>4</sup> *Burn!*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo (1969, United Artists; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2005), DVD. All dialogue quotations are taken from this edition of the film. The vast majority of the film’s dialogue is in English. I provide English translations of phrases delivered in Portuguese.

<sup>5</sup> Mbye Cham's overview of "Caribbean film practice" identifies three categories: "films made by Caribbean filmmakers inside the Caribbean"; "films made by Caribbean filmmakers outside the Caribbean"; and "films about the Caribbean, but made by people—both Black and white—who are not Caribbean in any way." Following these categories, *Burn!* is undoubtedly in the third. See Cham, "Introduction: Shape and Shaping of Caribbean Cinema," in *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1992), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Michelle A. Stephens, "Arc'd Relations: Archive and Archipelago in the Greater Caribbean," in *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, ed. Tatiana Flores and Michelle A. Stephens (Long Beach: Museum of Latin American Art, 2017), 279.

<sup>7</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves On Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 44.

<sup>8</sup> Neelam Srivastava, "Interview with the Italian Film Director Gillo Pontecorvo, Rome, Italy, 1 July 2003," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 7, no. 1 (2005): 115.

<sup>9</sup> Brady Harrison examines several fictionalizations of Walker's exploits in the Caribbean but does not mention *Burn!* This absence speaks to *Burn!*'s neglected status as a text of the archipelagic Americas and how, if the film has any reputation beyond anticolonial cinema, it is as a curious moment in Marlon Brando's career rather than as a radical dialogue with Walker's life. See Brady Harrison, *Agent of Empire: William Walker and the Imperial Self in American Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Neelam Srivastava, "Towards a Critique of Colonial Violence: Fanon, Gandhi, and the Restoration of Agency," in *Literature, Migration, and the "War on Terror,"* ed. Fiona Tolan et al. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 73.

<sup>11</sup> Yarimar Bonilla emphasizes that, despite the postcolonial attraction of the narrative of political modernity that moves from colony to national independence, many societies in the Caribbean have "flag independence" yet "still struggle with how to forge a more robust project of self-determination." Bonilla's reminder that "even at the height of the decolonization era, multiple political and economic formulas were the object of sustained debate and contemplation" provides a sense of how Dolores is not dealing with a situation where his only option is to replicate colonial rule and continue Queimada's plantations in order to participate in the global market for sugar. See Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), xiii–xiv, 11.

<sup>12</sup> A related context in which to understand Dolores's lack of engagement in amending Queimada's constitution as in fact an alternative form of political participation is the genealogy of antiwork politics that can be traced to nineteenth-century postemancipation

Jamaica. See Christopher Taylor, “The Refusal of Work: From the Postemancipation Caribbean to Post-Fordist Empire,” *Small Axe* 18, no. 2 / no. 44 (July 2014): 1–17.

<sup>13</sup> Michael T. Martin, “Podium for the Truth?: Reading Slavery and the Neocolonial Project in the Historical Film: *Queimada! (Burn!)* and *Sankofa* in Counterpoint,” *Third Text* 23, no. 6 (November 2009): 720.

<sup>14</sup> I borrow the phrase “sovereignty of the imagination” from George Lamming, who thinks of sovereignty not only as a political condition based on freedom from external control, but also as the creative will to think beyond the terms of normative politics. See Lamming and David Scott, “The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An Interview with George Lamming,” *Small Axe* 6, no. 2 / no. 12 (September 2002): 74–75 as well as Lamming, *The Sovereignty of the Imagination* (Kingston: Arawak Publications, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (1961; repr., New York: Grove Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>16</sup> George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960; repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 154, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Lamming, *Pleasures*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> George Lamming, “The Caribbean Intellectual and Western Education,” in *Crossroads of Empire: The European–Caribbean Connection, 1492–1992*, ed. Alan Cobley (Cave Hill: University of the West Indies Press, 1994), 92.

<sup>19</sup> Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens, “Introduction: Decontinentalizing the Study of American Culture,” in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 7.

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