Revolutionary *Queimada* and Pre-1959 Cuba: Sites of Imperial Influence and National Agency

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Released in 1969, the Italian-French film *Queimada!*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, narrates a fictitious Caribbean nation's quest for self-determination amidst competing imperial interests. *Queimada!* provides many interesting analytical frameworks for the critic-historian in its portrayal of consistent exploitation of brown bodies in the Caribbean. Caribbean nations

shared these challenges as they strove for liberation from European and U.S. imperial agendas and western hegemony. This article examines a less discussed historical category—the *agent provocateur*—that is thoroughly explored in the film through William Walker, the protagonist. Specifically, I compare *Queimada!*'s cinematic depiction of Walker, as he fueled revolutionary movements on the island, by arming revolutionaries and inciting violence, with the diplomatic policies of the United States for Cuba in the pre-1959 antebellum period. A comparative analysis of Queimada and Cuba may illuminate the extent to which organic movements vis-à-vis foreign contrivances forged sociopolitical changes on both islands (fictitious and otherwise). Beginning with an explication of the specific type of foreign intervention at work in both revolutionary Queimada and pre-1959 Cuba, I will analyze the relationship between the islands' citizens and the interloping foreign powers—from reliance and co-dependence to resistance and appropriation—thereby re-inserting the agency of local actors in the respective national narratives.

The political economies of colonial Queimada and pre-Revolution Cuba were both characterized by the sugarcane monoculture of plantations, powered by the stolen labor of enslaved people. Disregarding the islands' economic diversity or the rights of native inhabitants, the Portuguese and Spanish empires turned the islands into profit-generating machines. Nearly all references to Queimada's economy in the film are about sugarcane cultivation or the exportation of processed sugar. By the mid-twentieth century, Cuba, likewise, had developed extreme "dependency upon sugar and reliance upon U.S. trade and investment" such that "reliance upon U.S. trade and investment had become the predominant features of the island's economy" (Paterson 35). Considering the immense economic productivity of both Pontecorvo's Queimada and pre-1959 Cuba, it is clear that intervention on these islands could yield significant economic benefits for the interloping nations. Thus, although Britain and the United States excused their intervention in the name of the islands' development and stability, it is clear that British and U.S. interventions were motivated by economic prospects.

Despite Britain and the United States' repeated emphasis on the exigence of their interventions, foreign involvement in a sovereign nation's course of political evolution was not only unnecessary but also unwelcomed by local actors. As *Queimada!* and the general history of the Caribbean illustrate, enslaved people's desire for liberation was too fervent for their oppressors to suppress. Independence from the imperial yoke is not only desired by formerly enslaved people, but also from the islands' Creole elite. On Queimada, Creole elites, who were themselves economically privileged yet politically disenfranchised, supported the slave-initiated revolution to secure favorable terms for trade. This economic incentive for the creole elites is demonstrated in the scene between Walker and the cohort of creole planters:

> Gentlemen... Which do you prefer, or should I say, which do you find more convenient? A wife or one of these mulatto girls? I'm speaking strictly in terms of economics. [...] Now a wife must be provided with a home, with food, with dresses, with medical attention, etc. [...] Now, with a prostitute on the other hand, it's quite a different matter, isn't it? See, there is no need to lodge her, or to feed her. Certainly, not to dress her, to bury her, thank God. She's yours only when you need her. You pay her for that service and you pay her by the hour. Which, gentlemen, is more important and more convenient? A slave or a paid worker? Which do you find more convenient? Foreign domination with its laws, its vetoes, its taxes, its commercial monopolies, or independence with your own government, your own laws, your own administration and the freedom to trade with anyone you like? (Pontecorvo, *Queimada*)

Not only are enslaved people eager to attain personal liberation from an enslaving empire, Creole elites too are compelled to participate in the creation of a new state as to instill economic provisions beneficial to their interests. Even without foreign intervention on Queimada, independence movements would have occurred organically. In addition, it is clear that local agents distrust foreign presence in their countries' political scene. When William Walker exhorts the wife of executed rebel Santiago to introduce him to Santiago's former allies, she answers the Englishman with looks of doubt and unwavering silence. The fact that Walker is "not Portuguese" and therefore "a friend" does not matter to the woman.

(Pontecorvo, *Queimada*) She is unconvinced that Walker is any different from the other white men who try to manipulate the island's development. Differences in nationality do not negate their common agenda of exploitation and hegemony.

British imposition of development on Queimada parallels the United States' coercion of Cuba into accepting the neo-imperialist terms of the Platt Amendment. In 1898, U.S. President William McKinley approved a military invasion of Cuba. Officially, the invasion was to "help" Cuba break from the Spanish Empire. However, neo-imperial ambitions of the United States became clear as the Spanish-American War came to a close. Emerging as the new hegemonic superpower upon defeating Spain, the United States. coerced Cuba into accepting the Platt Amendment. Patronizing in its language use and exploitative in its provisions, the Platt Amendment mandated the leasing of Cuban lands to the U.S. for military use and allowed for U.S. intervention in Cuban elections in order to "preserve Cuban independence [and maintain] a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty" (Transcript of Platt Amendment). The emphasis on "life, property, and individual liberty" in the Platt Amendment was reminiscent of the U.S. Declaration of independence and shows a clear imposition of American values onto the Cuban people. The sense of entitlement and self-endowed superiority of the United States in pre-1959 Cuba is comparable to Walker's sentiments by the following scene in *Queimada!*:

> Walker: Who'll govern your island, José?
> Who'll run your industries? Who'll handle your commerce? Who'll cure the sick? Teach in your schools?
> [Pointing to a soldier in the room]
>
> This man? Or that man? Or the other?
> Civilisation is not a simple matter, José. You cannot learn its secrets overnight. Today civilisation belongs to the white man - and you must learn to use it. Without it, you cannot go forward. (Pontecorvo, *Queimada!*)

Walker's Eurocentric idea of spreading civilization is not entirely different from the anti-Communist stance adopted by U.S. administrations in the pre-1959 years. Both beliefs assume that people in peripheral nations do not understand what is good for themselves, and that "enlightened" nations like Britain and the United States have to guide them in developing their countries. In an exchange between U.S. Ambassador Jefferson Caffery and the military dictator Fulgencio Batista, Batista "asked Caffery what the United States wanted in exchange for recognition, [to which] the ambassador replied: a new government" (Paterson 16). Excuses for foreign intervention conjured by Britain and the United States not only erroneously assume that Western Civilization holds the only key to development in the Caribbean, but also that Western powers have the prerogative to overthrow governments whenever their protectorates do not accept Western values such as import-substitution (in the case of Queimada) and international capitalism (in the case of Cuba). Britain's response is to deploy an agent provocateur, whereas the United States supplied the Batista regime with arms to suppress internal conflicts.

Starting with the cooperation of Ambassador Caffery and Fulgencio Batista in interfering with the electoral process for Cuba's 1935 presidential and congressional elections, (Argote-Freyre 186) the United States strategically allied with local actors, whose interests coincided with the United States' own and fostered successful partnerships. On the one hand, the United States was concerned about its own diplomatic image and its reception by the Cuban people after decades of political, economic, and military intervention. On the other hand, the United States was reluctant to relinquish its influence over Cuba after decades of political maneuvering and economic investment. Having Cuban partners localized foreign intervention and created a false sense of legitimacy.

On March 7, 1952, three days before Batista's *coup d'état* against the regime of President Carlos Prío Soccarás, Cuba and the United States entered a bilateral military agreement known as the Mutual Defense Assistance Act (MDAA). Under the MDAA, the United States would "install Army, Navy, and Air Force missions on the island and [provide] military

equipment" (Paterson 58). Throughout 1957, the Cuban government made 18 requests to purchase arms from the United States, eleven of which were approved and seven of which were pending review. ("Memorandum") This Cuban-American military alliance was part of the United States' strategy of containment against the global spread of Communism. The temporal proximity between bilateral entrance into the MDAA and Batista's coup led many Cubans to suspect U.S. support for Batista's coup" (Paterson 58). However, according to State Department notes, "Batista's revolution came as a complete surprise both in Cuba and in [the United States]" ("Memorandum"). Nonetheless, the United States promptly recognized the new government and continued to supply armaments to the Batista government due to Batista's "satisfactory public and private statements with regard to Cuban intention to fulfill its international obligations; its attitude towards private capital; and its intention to take steps to curtail international communist activities in Cuba" ("Memorandum"). Despite Batista's government's clear violation of clauses in the MDAA that explicitly prohibited the use of American armaments for purposes other than "hemispheric defense," United States diplomats and military personnel "acknowledged that the regime marshaled the aid for internal security" (Paterson 59). Paterson notes that "officers had orders not to accompany Cuban units into combat [...] and U.S. officers [were not] supposed to advise the Cuban military on how to subdue the rebels. Yet the line was often crossed in training programs" (59). Although U.S. Ambassadors would protest the use of their imported arms to quell internal Cuban conflicts, in the majority of cases the U.S. was complicit. The United States needed local agents like Batista to legitimize its political, economic, and military participation in Cuba.

Just as foreign powers depended on local actors to legitimize their involvement in sovereign nations, local actors often depended on the support of foreign powers to legitimize their regimes within their home countries. For example, Batista "exploited these highly visible displays of military alliance to demonstrate U.S. backing of his regime" (Paterson 59). In addition, Batista often hosted United States diplomats and entrepreneurs in well-publicized events that scandalized the nation for their opulence while the population suffered from stark

income inequality, a fractured healthcare system, low literacy rates, and stagnation in general standard of living due to a poorly- diversified economy, highly sensitive to the prices of sugar on the international market. (Farber 7-33). Batista put on these displays because he understood that "U.S. officials' winking [...] at blatant Cuban violations" of the restrictive terms of the mutual security agreement was crucial to upholding the legitimacy of his abuses. (Paterson 59) Not only was Batista dependent on U.S. endorsement, but in the early days of the Revolution Fidel Castro was similarly dependent on U.S. resources and non-aggression. Castro's nascent revolutionary movement depended on the funds and lobbying efforts of Cuban exiles in the United States to launch. (Paterson 22) Although Castro did not depend on the United States government for the legitimization of his revolutionary movement, he did depend on citizens and residents of the United States—specifically those who were willing to fund anti-Batista dissidents—and their lobbying efforts to legitimize his cause. Thus, legitimization is a two-way street by collusion between foreign powers and local actors.

In addition to legitimization through local agents, the United States attempted to create an appearance of impartiality. This was to defend against dissident voices in Cuba that held "the United States responsible for much of the blood spilled during the insurrection" (Paterson 61). United States diplomatic policies toward Cuba were characterized by implicit support of an oppressive dictatorship and stern affirmations of non-intervention in Cuban affairs. In a 1953 note to the State Department, Willard L. Beaulac noted the "unsatisfactory political situation" arose from close relationships between the United States and the increasingly violent and oppressive Batista regime. Beaulac recommended that any relations with the dictatorship be conducted in the "most discreet manner possible" and that United States armed services "give the least possible publicity to the aid they are giving [to] the Cuban armed services" ("The Ambassador"). As per State Department instructions, Earl T. Smith also affirmed that the United States would not intervene in Cuban internal affairs in his first press conference as United States Ambassador to Cuba. It is, nonetheless, important to note that the official

position of non-intervention often did not correspond with its practice. In an exchange between Middle-American Affairs Director William Wieland and former president Carlos Prío (who was deposed by Batista), Prío asserted that the United States affirmation of non-intervention did not hold much significance because of the arbitrariness in the United States' decision to exercise "tutelage whenever it served U.S. interests to do so" (Paterson 98). The use of local agents to promote an appearance of non-intervention in Cuban-American relations is paralleled by British deployment of *agent provocateur* William Walker of *Queimada!* Without making himself known to anyone other than José Dolores, whose face and status within the enslaved community was crucial to the success of Walker's plan, and the Creole elites whose political support Walker tries to marshal, Walker fuels revolutionary movements. Without the omniscient perspective that the critic-historian in the audience enjoyed, one would assume that all revolutionary actions taken by José Dolores and his colleagues were organically conceived. With foreign intervention unknown to others apart from the main actors, the legitimacy of rebel victory is secured. Although intervention from Britain through Walker was unnoticed on Queimada, the specter of American capital and military involvement looming large over Cuba did not pass unnoticed.

Consecutive U.S. administrations, preoccupied with the curtailing of communism and the maintenance of the American sphere of influence in Latin America, failed to adapt to popular resentment of the Batista regime in Cuba. As popular discourse in Cuba demonstrates, foreign intervention in the natural course of a sovereign nation's political evolution is not only futile but it may also draw resentment upon itself. In a 1959 speech "Message of the Cuban Revolution," Castro denounced "North American intervention, be it with troops, ambassadors, military or economic missions" and directly accused "the North American Military Mission, which under the pretext of the Cold War and Non-Existent dangers in the hemisphere, assisted the troops of Batista and trained them to drop bombs made in the United States" (Castro). Ultimately, the neutral image that interlopers tried to present and preserve failed to take root in the hearts of the dominated people, who decided for themselves that foreign intervention is

nothing but imperialist control. Castro's sentiments were paralleled by José Dolores's message to insurgents:

> If a man works for another, even if he is called a worker, he remains a slave and it will always be the same, since there are those who own the plantations and those who own the machetes to cut cane for the owners. (Pontecorvo, *Queimada!*)

Despite repeated acts of intervention that bordered on aggression by foreign powers, both *Queimada!* and Cuban history demonstrate that any desire to break free from the yoke of imperialism by local actors cannot be deterred. In the face of United States' military support for the Cuban army, revolutionaries did not passively accept defeat but rather found ways to appropriate intervention from foreign powers to their advantage. For example, in the revolutionaries' resistance against Batista's 1958 offensive Operation Verano, "underarmed rebels [...] collected the army's abandoned weapon" that were often of better quality than the armaments rebels sourced from the Dominican Republic. (Hart Philips 367) A *fidelista* rebel even joked that "I think we made a mistake when we got the United States to stop shipping arms to Batista. Now we can never capture decent rifles" (Paterson 155). Rebels reclaimed agency by thwarting the suppressive goals of the Cuban-American military cohort and appropriating their resources for the advancement of the revolutionary cause.

In the case of Castro's mountain campaigns and José Dolores' use of Walker's ammunition, protagonists in the 1969 film and Cuban history each appropriated resources of foreign powers to mobilize support for their own causes. In reaction to foreign intervention, local actors seldom swallowed neo-imperialist terms imposed upon them passively. Instead, in temporary alliance, direct rejection, or indirect subversion, local actors continued to advance their causes of decolonization and thwarted the false facade of legitimacy contrived by foreign powers. In *Queimada!*, the agency of local actors even inspires the foreign agent Walker to question the morality of his interventions and the hegemonic parties whose interests he

represents. *Queimada!* and pre-1959 Cuba provide useful cases for analyzing decolonization and neo-imperialism in the Caribbean, the consequences of which continue to affect the contemporary discourse on Caribbean nations' self-determination and their role apart from the American empire.

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