

ALLIED FORCES, FORCED ALLIANCES: A REACTION TO GERALD T. BURNS' S "ENEMIES AND FRIENDS: A CONSIDERATION OF THE BURNHAM KIDNAPPING"

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About the Author

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Contrary to customary opinion, area studies covers a vast zone of knowledge. While Philippine Studies, for example, may initially be local in orientation, it is subsequently regional, and global in its trajectory. For archipelagic/islandic issues must involve, although with difficulty, the rest of Southeast Asia, and geopolitical concerns can only be addressed when connected with, for good or for ill, America. Since the study focuses on points and moments of encounter, the matrix of history, society, culture, and politics that area studies can lay out is limitless, depending of course on the inquiry. With a geographic turn in the humanities, there lies a most welcome shift from the preponderance of topics to a pondering on (the) tropics. Gerald Burns' talk presents an interesting view of the Philippines primarily because it avoids a kind of critique that so far only reaches the frontiers of convention, ending up in descriptions of this part of the globe as an underground, a backwater, or a peripheral vision of American cross-cultural ambitions. What is ultimately significant in Burns' ruminations is his reading of the problematic of encounter along "enmity" and "friendship" — tropes that could only manifest in a hostage's recollection of seizure, detention, abandonment, and ransom.

My reaction to Gerald Burns' lecture will consist of four parts, each focusing on the horizons of interpretation that Burns himself proposes in looking at the tension between animosity and affection in Gracia Burnham's memoir. My critique will therefore try to articulate 1) the post-exotic moment as announced by the captivity narrative; 2) the loose

(and the losing) ends of the entangled relations between the Philippines and the United States as they are laid out in the hostage crisis; 3) the neo-orientalism that the War on Terror in Burnham's experience launches and perpetuates; 4) and the ideology of evangelization as prefigured by Gracia Burnham's testimonial rhetoric.

Before I touch on each of the four topics, I would like to dwell briefly on the complex binarism between "enemies and friends" that Burns employs in providing us an intense dialectic of struggle in the context of a hostage crisis. Such dilemma becomes easier to grasp because Gracia Burnham documents the conception, furtherance, resolution, and undoing of the said conflict. But because Burnham's writing is far from being assured, her rapturous self becomes a scapegoat of sorts, the object of our allegorizing. We say allegory, because enemies and friends here are not just anonymous individuals embroiled in petty quarrels of the fleeting and parochial everyday. Instead they are social subjects trapped in the web of conspiracy that deploys both local and global practices of capture, maneuver, resistance, as well as capitulation.

EXHAUSTING THE POST-EXOTIC

Burns begins his reading of Gracia Burnham's *In The Presence of the Enemies* by summoning the form of the memoir, the captivity narrative (8), which is a subgenre of the travel essay. As a species of the latter, Gracia's story emphasizes the post-exotic. Because of the experience of confinement, the Westerner ceases to be enamored with the East, which has lost its mystical allure to the Tourist Gaze.

In Gracia's eyes, paradise is not only lost, she is also lost *in* it. Proof of this is the apparent absence of descriptions of the terrain and the latter's reduction to "jungle" or "mountains" (4), generic labels that tell of the visitor's falling *out* of place. The minutiae no longer refers to the travels but to the travails of the hostage, the tone changing from one that entices to one that dissuades, for the sojourner realizes that it has become the most unfortunate of visits. In naming the generic tradition to which Gracia Burnham appends her writing, Burns helps the reader recall intertexts which make the narrative more immediate—accounts of the *tides* of change in post-tsunami Phuket, chronicles of a Bali in the aftermath of bombings.

But how does the captivity narrative breed the tentative categories of friends and enemies? Is it the trauma of enclosure and displacement that inevitably causes the writer to lose distinctions between the two? Or is it the mere loss of a sense of place? If gender is one marker of subjectivity, how does Gracia's womanhood influence her rehearsal of the

genre? Conversely, how does the gendering *replace* her position on subjection, say, from victimhood to survival to transcendence? In short, how does the writing of the entrapment necessarily encode a history of consciousness, of a self-in-transit?

THE PHILIPPINES AND THE U.S.: UNKNOTTING THE ENTANGLEMENT

Needless to say, it is unavoidable to see the hostage situation outside the “entangled” bilateral politics between the United States and the Philippines, a filial bond wrought in the histories of colonial rule and neocolonial intervention; linked in destinies of political apprenticeship, economic dependence, and cultural affinity; broken by discourses of nationalism, independence, competition, difference; but restored in a beatific vision of globalization and the devils that predict and live out its fall, like terrorism.

Unknotting the entanglement can be tricky, for isolating the strands may prevent us from truly comprehending the problematic of encounter. But an instance in Burnham’s account can instruct us on how tight (and loose) the bond has become. In the middle of the sea, hostages both local and foreign burst into longing for their freedom by singing Beatles classics, making them all friends amid the catastrophe, like the comrades in Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat.” But in a moment of macabre irony, the perceived enemies would join in the lyrical cry of let’s say “Let It Be” (13). With that kind of music, is there still room for the malady?

An event like the Burnham hostage demands the implication of friends and their enemies in issues of renewed allegiances or eventual realignment. Both parties are made to reexamine the entanglements among their kith and kin, across and down the ranks, beyond all distances and intimacies. A hostage crisis tests the ties that bind “friendly states.” Regardless of the outcome, observations and judgments may herald international cooperation on the one hand, or proclaim a continuing patronage politics. But Burns insists on the nuance of it all, pointing out how the hostage herself poses her own reservations on the filial bond between nations, having been thrown not only along the lines of the dangerous liaison but in the center of its violent trysts (14-18). Hence, we cannot help but ask: How stable and reliable are these alliances? Or are they only for convenience’s sake, to create a simulacrum of both war and peace?

The hostage experiences the entanglement in its most horrifying convolutions. But beyond the undeniable familiarity with the enemy, she still experiences an apparent estrangement from him. This distance of course does not allow her to develop full objectivity, but a proto-racism, a cultural condescension that is not entirely unfounded.

Victim and survivor, Gracia can only desire to break loose from the entanglement. This makes her neither adversarial nor affectionate to the romance that is the US and the Philippines. Because of this undecidability, we nonetheless ask how Gracia Burnham figures in that relation? As the informer and herself an informant in her own autoethnography, does she employ the character of friend? Or does she unwittingly *write* herself off as *the* enemy?

ANTI-TERRORIST: NEO-ORIENTALIST

There are two instances that Burns cites where we see the problem of Burnham's alliance and allegiance to her native country. First, when she writes to her sister that the scenario has become "so difficult. [And] *everyone* is being stubborn," (20) including the American government. Second, in a post-hostage interview in Kansas City, where she says that should have appealed directly to the American public "to get ransom together" (21).

Burns is quick in observing that while the first statement somehow dismisses the whole paradigm of a War on Terror that is spearheaded by the American leadership, the second, in reconciling with the rest of America, includes "reenlistment" in the anti-terrorism programmatic (Ibid.). Thus Burns surmises that "all lines that had been rubbed out in the memoir have been re-drawn, and all enemies and friends are back in the assigned places" (22). This means that even though the post-exotic has already been declared, the racism that was once latent threatens to get full-blown, and the neo-orientalist, along with all its systems of silencing, reverberates. All because, after the writing, Burnham has to realign herself to a nationalist project.

THE IDEOLOGY OF EVANGELIZATION

This return to orthodoxy is somehow masked by the ideology of evangelization that is prefigured by Gracia Burnham's testimonial rhetoric. In the end, Burns utilizes the Burnhams' missionary context to ultimately pinpoint Gracia's discernment of the hostage by conjecturing that "it seems as if the heritage of her missionary commitment points her inexorably to this position: that the outcome most to be desired from Christians 'showing their love' and 'acting their love' toward Muslims is the *conversion* of the latter."

While this judgment may seem to be unfair to some, Burns has carefully and convincingly founded his claim. Burns subtly tells us that while Gracia's captivity hovers above her narrative; her conversion deeper into the Faith is embedded within it. And others

will have to be part of this freedom, for the inner war to be waged and won, completely.

I can only agree with his sharp insight into a human character, one that Burns sees as tragic on the one hand, because of a pride that seems to exempt itself from all manner of self-awareness, but redeemed on the other, because of a heart that is unashamed to reveal both its selfless desires and selfish wishes.

It is in being an evangelist that Gracia Burnham can resonate with an unlikely counterpart like Francisco Balagtas, who at the end of *Florante at Laura*, falls prey to his own proselytizing motives by converting Aladin and Flerida from Islam to Catholicism, after they save Florante at Laura from the machinations of Adolfo, the usurer. How religion can play out the dramatic irony among the most unlikely of allies and their forces!

To many, war can only be understood in terms of who wins and who loses, and on whose side one is with after the truce. In the end, either one is an ally or an adversary, a friend or an enemy. Nevertheless, Gerald Burns does not limit himself to merely identifying the dramatis personae that stages the battle in Gracia Burnham's *In The Presence of My Enemies*. In reading the said memoir of a hostage, Burns convinces us that even the most enduring of battles is not exempt from unscrupulous choices and compromising tactics, for politics is indeed riddled with the shifting of alliances. He tells us that while war can be understood by way of the subtle gestures of allegory, one cannot reduce the strategies to the crude movements in a morality play. In short, cultural politics cannot find in didacticism a ground in which it can thrive, if not bear fruit, nor flourish. If only for reminding us what things may sell our souls to the enemy, we have found in Burns a friend worth saving.

WORK CITED

Burnham, Gracia and Dean Merrill. *In the Presence of My Enemies*. Illinois: Tyndale, 2003.