Bridge-building as a Way of Doing Theology: an Autobiographical Essay

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Bridge-building is one metaphor that describes Brazal's way of responding to her theological vocation. Trained to "bridge" people toward solidarity in the context of the Marcos dictatorship, she has carried this orientation and skill in doing theology and helped transform the theological research climate for Philippine and Asian women theologians. She developed a theological discourse analysis that bridges praxis, other disciplines, and theology, that she usually employs in doing vernacular-postcolonial theologies, connecting the local with metropolitan cultures. She contributed to the elaboration of the intercultural church as bridge of solidarity in the migration context, bridged virtual worlds in doing cybertheology, and focused on the link between nature, the poor, and theology in her latest foray in ecological and disaster theology.

Introduction

In the two-thirds world, theologians who are mostly overloaded with courses and other responsibilities, could only do theology in "bits and pieces,"[1] that is, as we respond to invitations to deliver a talk, or write a paper for a pastoral formation program, a conference, an anthology or a journal. For myself, it is only in hindsight that I realized that what I have been doing in fragments can be captured by the image of "bridge-building."

Bridges are "in-between spaces" which allow us to cross a divide. In everyday life, a bridge is a physical structure, built over a river or land that allows people or vehicles to cross from one side

[1] The term has been used by Jesuit theologian Catalino Arevalo to describe his way of doing theology. C. Arevalo, "After Vatican II: Theological Reflection on Church in the Philippines, 1965-1987," *Landas* 2 (1988): 16.

to another. It serves as a connecting route between two geographical points or adjacent elements in order to reduce differences of time, distance, or human contexts.

In a symbolical way, bridges offer people a way to cross geographical, social, economic, political, cultural and religious boundaries. Bridges can provide a space to talk about differences and to be renewed in our perceptions of the other. In human relationships, the bridge is the person or group who acts as a go-between. When Filipinos, for example, want to communicate with one another, especially among people of different status, they sometimes use a third party who is familiar to the concerned parties. This bridge serves many functions, such as conveying messages, negotiating, facilitating, trouble-shooting, and even settling disputes and reconciling. Bridges therefore function both as site and as means or medium for social groups separated by a divide to meet or for cultural discourses to be mutually enriched.[2]

"DEKADA SETENTA" GENERATION: "BRIDGING" TOWARD SOLIDARITY

I belong to the "dekada setenta" (70s decade) generation, composed of students who struggled to overthrow the regime of Ferdinand Marcos whose dictatorship began in 1972. I spent most of my growing up and young adult years (22 years in total) during the reign of Marcos. I started to become more conscious of what was happening in Philippine society when I entered college at the Ateneo de Manila University. The University thrust then was to form "men [and women] for others" and to grow in faith that does justice. I volunteered with the Federation of Free Workers and the Office for Social Concern and Involvement. In my last year in college, I was elected as the fifth President of the scholars' organization in the University and strengthened its social orientation. As a student leader/volunteer, I started honing my skills in organizing, in "bridging" toward solidarity. While not being directly a member of any party, I was more ideologically

[2] Bridging, however, can also be negatively employed, in acts of bribery, nepotism, or corruption.

aligned with the Social Democracy group and not with the more extreme left national democratic group in the Philippines.

As the situation in the country was becoming bleak, after finishing my undergraduate studies in Management Engineering, instead of working in a corporation which was what my degree prepared me for, I opted to become a community organizer of coconut tenants. The situation at the areas where we did organizing work that time became highly militarized. It was there where my two other women fellow organizers and I were mistaken to be in collaboration with the New People's army guerillas. We were surrounded by five heavily armed men and brought to Camp Guillermo Nakar in Lucena, Quezon for interrogation, but were released after three hours of detention. One of our farmer members, however, was salvaged a few weeks later. Judging that the situation in the area was no longer safe, our office pulled us out of the area. When fellow organizers went back to the area in 1986, after Marcos was ousted, to their surprise, the groups we organized were still active. Since then, they have become a part of a bigger alliance of farmers' organizations.

The year after I was recalled from my organizing work in Nakar, I decided to enter the religious life, joining the Religious of the Sacred Heart (RSCJ) sisters. I was convinced at that time that it was in that context that I would be pursuing my vocation as a Christian. I worked as a campus minister and as a student organizer at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP). I was ousted from the said State University for leading the members of the Student Catholic Action-Campus Ministry Office in promoting the CBCP post-election call to discern civil disobedience. I was, however, immediately reinstated after the People Power revolution of 1986 overthrew Marcos from power. The RSCJ sisters and I joined this momentous event from the first night to the last day. My next ministry was as director of a Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) Program in Northern Samar, an impoverished and highly militarized province in central Philippines. As BEC director, I negotiated between the more radical priests' (National Democratic Front aligned) Basic Christian Community-Community Organizing program and the bishop who wanted more church-directed BECs. With the continued support of the RSCJs, even

after I left Samar, the BECs in the eight towns we had organized at that time continue to thrive until today.

METHOD: BRIDGING PRAXIS, OTHER DISCIPLINES, AND THEOLOGY

My next assignment after the Samar stint was my studies in the graduate theology at the Maryhill School of Theology (MST) where I got to know more Jesus of Nazareth and his vision of God's reign of justice and peace. After three years of studies and nine years in religious life, I felt that I was being called to redirect my journey toward becoming a lay theologian. Immediately upon leaving religious life, missionary-theologian Lode Wostyn, the MST Dean, recommended me for doctoral studies at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven).

Because of my background as a social activist and community organizer, I got interested in liberation theology and in Marxism as dialogue partners of theology. In my license thesis at the KU Leuven, I analyzed how John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* drew from, as well as, differed from Marxist thoughts.[3] This allowed me to broaden my understanding of the ideas of Karl Marx.

Convinced that a theological method is foundational for professional theologizing, I opted to do my doctoral dissertation on method. As an organizer and a pastoral worker, I was familiar with structural analysis that was widely in use then, and with the see-discern/judge-act pastoral cycle which was developed further in liberation theology. From 1994 to 1996, the Center for Liberation Theology in Leuven where I was an active member, engaged in a research project examining the shift in liberation theologies after 25 years, from socio-economic or structural analysis to [philosophic] cultural analysis and the factors behind this – both intra-ecclesial as well as extra-ecclesial (*e.g.,* the shift from modernity to reflexive

[3] "John Paul II on Labour and Culture: An Assessment in the Light of Hegel and Marx," *Inter-Sectiones*, no. 1 (1995): 11-29.

(post) modernity).[4] I got interested in deepening how this turn would impact the method of doing theology of liberation.

I explored in my doctoral dissertation how Clodovis Boff's Classic Methodological Mediations[5] (socio-analytic, hermeneutic, and practical) can be recast to integrate Contextual-Cultural [Feminist] Values and Perspectives. The main contribution of my dissertation consists in: 1) demonstrating the limits of Boff's method, which was strongly influenced by the structuralism of the neo-Marxist Louis Althusser and thus, does not recognize the direct role of the praxis of Christian communities in discerning the validity of a theological proposition; and 2) my development of the community mediation (*i.e.,* the direct role of Christian communities in the discernment process) which was absent in Boff's articulation of the method of liberation theology.[6]

Though I have been using a recast See-Judge-Act method in my theology courses, I also saw the need for a more concrete

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[4] See Georges De Schrijver, "Paradigm Shift in Third-World Theologies of Liberation: From Socio-Economic Analysis to Cultural Analysis?" in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*, ed. Georges de Schrijver (Leuven: Leuven University, 1998), 3-83.

[5] Boff in *Theology and Praxis* came out with the most systematic exposition of the role of praxis in the process of doing a theology of the political in the eighties, in response to those who would accuse the theology of liberation as simply ideological. In elaborating the method, he guards against the "e*mpiricism* of a theology drawn immediately from praxis and directly treating of praxis, or to the *pragmatism* of a theology directly oriented to praxis or managed directly for the benefit of praxis," which are dangers any praxis-based theology must guard. Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), 14.

[6] See Agnes Brazal, "Exploring Some Epistemological Implications of the Shift in Third World Theologies of Liberation," in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds*, 273-286; "Feminist Ideology Criticisms, the Bible and the Community," *MST Review* 2 no.2 (1999): 97-117; "Praxis in Doing Practical/Moral Contextual Theologies: Intersecting Concerns," in forthcoming, *Catholic Approaches to Practical Theology: International and Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Annemie Dillen (Leuven: Peeters).

methodology in the context of reflexive (post) modernity. I developed a theological discourse analysis appropriated from the poststructuralist, postcolonial, neo-Marxist theorist Stuart Hall.[7] Its outline can be found in my article "Redeeming the Vernacular."[8] It appropriates for theology Hall's circuit of culture and integrates insights from Michel Foucault.

A discourse, for Foucault, refers to several statements that provide a language to talk about a topic at a particular historical conjuncture.[9] It is important to note that a discourse here is more than a linguistic concept; it is produced by discursive practices like institutional regulations that shape conduct. Influenced by Foucault, Hall highlights the link between knowledge, power and the body. Power is implicated in deciding on issues of what constitutes knowledge. Likewise, this knowledge has the power to regulate conduct (*i.e.,* of particular bodies), restrict as well as discipline practices.

Our discourse analysis has five components: *representation, identities, production, consumption,* and *regulation*. It seeks to answer the following questions: What are the various representations of a cultural text? What identities (based on gender, ethnicity, age, *etc.*) are linked with these representations? What was the context of production of these representations? This includes not only the discourse's socio-historical context but also how it relates to different disciplines. How are these representations consumed or decoded (rejected, appropriated, or negotiated)? How do these

[7] Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (Keynes: The Open University, 1997), 24-25.

[8]Agnes Brazal, "Redeeming the Vernacular: Doing Postcolonial-Intercultural Theological Ethics." *Asian Horizons* 4, no. 1 (June 2010): 50-66; "A 'Models' Approach: Teaching Fundamental Moral Theology in an Intercultural World," in *Transformative Theological Ethics: East Asian Contexts,* ed. Agnes M. Brazal, Aloysius Cartagenas, Eric Genilo and James Keenan (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 69-87.

[9] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), 193.

representations regulate conduct (*i.e.,* how it leads to certain actions or behavior)? One of the aims of discourse analysis is to identify conflicts or struggles over meaning so as to avoid sacralizing a meaning that reinforces the oppressive powers of dominant groups.[10]

In this discourse analysis, one need not separate the structural (or socio-economic) analysis from the philosophic-cultural analysis for they are intertwined within the method itself. As we have noted, a discourse is not simply a linguistic concept; it is linked to discursive practice such as socio-economic-political institutions and structures.

The discourse analysis is a heuristic guide, and therefore in my essays, one finds the product of the analysis and not a step-by-step answer to the questions in discourse analysis. This discourse analysis can be applied in the see-judge-act stages of doing theology or in a revised correlation[11] of the contemporary human experience/praxis and the Christian tradition. A hermeneutics of appreciation and suspicion are applied on both the cultural text and the Christian tradition from the perspective of the margins and a standpoint shaped by the effective history of the Gospels.

Though this method is useful for theologizing in general, I have often employed it for doing vernacular-postcolonial theologies.

[10] The importance of discourse analysis within a certain national culture is illustrated in the Indian inculturation of Christianity within the Brahmanic tradition, which was later contested by other voices as the Dalits for reinforcing the caste system.

[11] Kristen Heyer, "How does Theology go Public? Rethinking the Debate between David Tracy and George Lindbeck." *Political Theology* 5, no. 3 (2004): 307-27.

Vernacular-Postcolonial Theologies: Bridging Local and Metropolitan Cultures[12]

Very conscious of how deeply ingrained colonial mentality is in the lowland Philippines,[12] one of my desires when I studied theology was to help decolonize theology by rearticulating the Christian tradition using Philippine vernacular categories and resources.[13] I had lay theologian Jose de Mesa as my professor in a number of subjects at the Maryhill School of Theology, and therefore received solid training in doing inculturation.

My theological discourse analysis, though, when applied to a vernacular text (conceptual category, narratives/story, and ritual/performance), goes beyond traditional inculturation approaches which regard culture as a homogenous whole, and ignore the role of power in cultural constructions. Employing both a hermeneutics of appreciation and suspicion, it discerns different representations of a cultural text and identifies a preferred vernacular reading which one then reflects on in the light of the Christian tradition. The Christian tradition itself is not a monolithic whole thus discourse analysis is applied as well in reading the Christian tradition and in the dialogue with the cultural text.

As an example, in my essay on "Power-Beauty Feminism and Postcolonial Leadership,"[14] I studied different representations of the "power-beauty" construct based on the Philippine creation myth of *Malakas* and *Maganda*. Though the myth is indigenous, the names *Malakas* for the male and *Maganda* for the female have been

[12] Many Filipinos in the highlands like the Cordillerans have resisted colonization and assimilation to the culture of the colonizers.

[13] What can be considered "vernacular" is relative and moveable depending on who is using what and against whom. For example, before, vis-à-vis Latin, the other European languages are vernacular languages.

[14] Agnes M. Brazal, "Power-Beauty Feminism and Postcolonial Leadership," in *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World* Church, eds. Linda Hogan and A. Orobator (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2014.), 72-84.

given by the Spanish colonizers[15] who may have wanted to impose their complementary and dualistic gender construct to the natives. A discourse analysis however of the power-beauty construct shows how this has been ingeniously subverted to represent a more fluid gender relation between women and men.

Mina Roces, a historian who studied kinship politics in the Philippines, demonstrated that Philippine female image of power is always linked to beauty, either physical or moral.[16] She identified two symbols of female power during the period of the Marcos dictatorship (1972-1986): the militant nun and the political activist.[17] They exert moral power-beauty as they speak with, or on behalf of, the victims of martial rule.[18] The iconic symbol of female power and leadership however in the Philippines is the *babaylan*. While male leaders who stood to gain from the new patriarchal religion seem to have more readily capitulated to the Spanish colonizers, it is the *babaylanes* who persisted longer in the resistance.[19] In one place the *babaylanes* were even called *Daitan*, meaning friendship and peace, suggesting that they are friends of the spirits and bringers of peace to the community.[20]

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[15] In the Visayan version of the myth, the man and the woman are simply referred to as Sicalac and Sicauay, respectively. Damiana Eugenio, *The Myths*, vol. 2. *Philippine Folk Literature* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1993), 293-296.

[16] Mina Roces, *Women, Power and Kinship Politics: Female Power in Post-War Philippines* (Pasay City: Anvil Publishing, 2000). By power, we mean the capacity to influence others to act in a certain direction.

[17] Ibid., 18.

[18] Ibid., 182. In many Philippine languages, the ethically good is referred to as "beautiful" (*maganda*) while moral evil is called "ugly" (*pangit*). Leonardo Mercado, *The Filipino Mind: Philippine Philosophical Studies II* (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994), 88-89.

[19] Carolyn Brewer, *Holy Confrontation: Religion, Gender and Sexuality in the Philippines, 1521-1685* (Manila: Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholastica's College, 2001), 309-50.

[20] Francisco Ignacio Alzina, *Historia de las Islas e indios de Bisayas (1668)*, cited by Alicia P. Magos, *The Enduring Ma-aram Tradition: An*

Power-beauty articulations can also be found in Philippine Catholic beliefs and practices, particularly in the Santacruzan religious procession. The Santacruzan which dates back to the Spanish colonial period is the most widely celebrated folk religious procession in the Philippines. It commemorates the legend of the finding of the Cross of Jesus by Queen Helena and Emperor Constantine. The procession features literally beautiful women representing strong personages in the Bible and in Christian history who have made special contributions to the growth of the faith. It is interesting to note that a century before feminist scriptural hermeneutics reached the country's shores, the Philippine popular imagination had already given recognition to the important role of biblical women like Esther, Judith, and Mary Magdalene in the Santacruzan. The highlight, however, is Queen Helena, with the young Constantine at her side.

The link between power and beauty is also exemplified in the image of Christ of the nineteenth century revolutionaries against imperial Spain. In the singing of the Philippine *Pasyon* during Holy Week, the revolutionaries fighting the Spanish colonizers began to link more the powers of Christ to his beautiful *loob*, which is not only pure and controlled but attracts others in its graciousness.[21]

I employed this reading of the link between power and beauty in analyzing from a postcolonial perspective the narratives about two biblical women featured in the Santacruzan – Judith and Esther. Both physically attractive, they deployed their physical and moral beauty as well as strength to resist domination and save their nation. Judith models prophetic resistance to imperial forces symbolizing the weak who through a combination of gracious goodness and courage inspire unity and solidarity and defeat the mighty. Similarly, Esther is endowed with physical beauty which she

Ethnography of a Kinaray-a Village in Antique (Quezon City: New Day Publications, 1992), 9.

[21] Reynaldo Clemeña Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979), 41.

capitalized on to become queen of the Persian Empire and to save the Jews in diaspora from annihilation. Both Judith and Esther however returned to the "private" space of the home after victory was won. They are in a sense ambivalent models of female leadership, gaining some grounds in their ethnic struggles but keeping intact the patriarchal structure.

This method of doing vernacular theology is a type of what Homi Bhabha refers to as vernacular cosmopolitanism which rejects a binary understanding of the local and the global, but "from a position where 'locality' insists on its own terms."[22] In comparison, feminist discourses in the West have been characterized largely by what has been referred to as *kalliphobia* (hostility to beauty). Many Western feminists view beauty practices as contributing to the production and regulation of femininity and maintaining the unequal power relations between the sexes and among women.[23] Beauty in fact has not generally been considered a working subject for feminist interrogation, and instead feminists opt to speak about the body. Some changes have been noted, however, by Rita Felski who reviewed some contemporary writings on beauty. She claims that "[t]he trajectory of feminist work on beauty has shown a distinct (though far from unanimous) shift from the rhetoric of victimization and oppression to an alternative language of empowerment and resistance."[24] Our local discourse

[22] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Vernacular Cosmopolitan," in *Voices of the Crossing: The Impact of Britain on Writers from Asia, the Caribbean and Africa*, ed. Naseem Khan. (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000), 141, 195.

[23] See Kathy Davis, "Beauty (the Feminine Beauty System)," in *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, ed. Lorraine Code (Abingdon, Oxon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2000), 39; Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West: Women and Psychology* (East Sussex, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2005).

[24] Rita Felski, "'Because It is Beautiful': New Feminist Perspectives on Beauty," *Feminist Theory* 7 (2006): 280. Among the few women theologians who have written on beauty from a feminist perspective are Susan Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality, and Justice* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006); Susan Ross, "Women, Beauty and Justice: Moving Beyond von Balthasar," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1

contributes to this debate in its focus on the Philippine's more fluid "power-beauty" articulation.

In "Harnessing Cultural Resources toward Solidarity," I also examined how Gawad Kalinga draws energies from a Christian appropriation of *bayanihan* and *padugo* and how the Obo Manobos of Mount Apo are able to revitalize their community from a cultural resource like dance, toward fighting and winning the struggle for their ancestral land claim.[25]

Some of my other works, using vernacular postcolonial discourse analysis, focused on *pakikipagkapwa* in relation to ecological theology and the Trinity, sexuality from a postcolonial-intercultural perspective, and exploring how principles of Catholic Social Teaching can be rearticulated using Asian vernacular idioms.[26]

FEMINISM: CONNECTING WOMEN IN/AND THEOLOGY

Both in an explicit and implicit manner, a feminist perspective runs through all my theological works. I first encountered feminist theology at the RSCJ community where I met Sr. Barbara Bowe who later became professor at the Chicago Theological Union and Sr. Amelia Vasquez, the first female dean of a theological school in the Philippines. They introduced me to feminist theology both at the convent and when I studied as a young professed nun at the Maryhill School of Theology. As other feminists of my generation, I started first as a social activist against

(Spring/Summer 2005): 79-98; and Michelle A. Gonźalez, Sor Juana: *Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003).

[25] Agnes M. Brazal, "Harnessing Cultural Resources of Marginalized Communities toward Solidarity," *MST Review* 11, no. 1 (2009): 31-59.

[26] Agnes M. Brazal and Emmanuel S. de Guzman). *Intercultural Church: Bridge of Solidarity in the Migration Context* (San Jose, CA: Borderless Press, 2015); Brazal, "Sexuality from a Postcolonial-Intercultural Perspective," in forthcoming, *Roots and Routes: Catholic Feminism in the Philippines*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Agnes Brazal. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications); "East Asian Discourses on Harmony: A Mediation for Catholic Social Teaching," in *Catholic Social Teaching in Global Perspective*, ed. Dan McDonald (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2010), 118-46.

the Marcos regime and later broadened my concern to include gender issues in the 1980s. At the Catholic university of Louvain, I was among the members – students and assistants – of the Women in Theology group. I took a course on Women's Studies Theology and explored feminist epistemologies/methodologies in my dissertation. Since I came back from my studies at KU Leuven, I have been teaching Feminist Theology in different theological schools or integrating the feminist perspectives in theology subjects that I teach.[27] Of the twenty theses/paper writers I successfully mentored, seven wrote MA theses and five did MA Project papers specifically on Feminist Theologies. Appropriating feminist scholarship and based on my experience with raising our son, I also wrote a gender-sensitive grade school textbook series. [28]

My feminist theologizing was basically strengthened by my involvement in the Ecclesia of Women in Asia, an association of women theologians in Asia, that I helped organized. I became its first official Coordinator when it was still struggling as an infant and stayed on in the coordinating team until it got institutionalized. I then continued to be a support staff as joint treasurer. I had edited two publications of the EWA: *Body and Sexuality* (finalist, National Book Award for Theology and Religion given by the Manila Critics Circle in cooperation with the National Book Development Board) and *Feminist Cyberethics in Asia*.[29] EWA promotes theologizing within the cultural context of Asia, and this has helped focus my writing on Philippine/Asian theologizing.

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[27] Agnes Brazal, "A 'Models' Approach: Teaching Fundamental Moral Theology in an Intercultural World," in *Transformative Theological Ethics: East Asian Contexts,* ed. Agnes M. Brazal, Aloysius Cartagenas, Eric Genilo and James Keenan (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 69-87.

[28] Agnes M. Brazal, *Growing Up as Christians in God's Family Series* (Grades 1-6 Textbooks), 1st and 2nd ed. (Bulacan: Trinitas Publishing, 2009/2012).

[29] Agnes Brazal and Andrea Lizares Si, eds., *Body and Sexuality: Theological-Pastoral Perspectives of Women in Asia* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007); with Kochurani Abraham, eds. *Feminist Cyberethics in Asia: Religious Discourses on Human Connectivity* (N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Among my essays which directly deal with women's issues are on prostitution where I employed the concept of tragedy to argue for its decriminalization, image of church in the context of the issue of sex trafficking, interculturality as feminist peace praxis, and gender role fluidity.[30] On the latter, I argued in one essay that the *Lakas-Ganda* category possesses potentials for re-articulating or reimagining how Filipino husbands and wives, are positively negotiating their gender identities in the context of the feminization of migration.[31]

Lakas and *Ganda* respectively refer to physical strength and beauty but may also be interpreted as Inner Strength (*lakas ng loob*)/Gracious Goodness (*ganda ng loob*).[32] Jesus himself possessed qualities of *lakas* (inner strength) and *ganda* (gracious goodness; compassion).

He showed gracious goodness when he welcomed the children to come to him; when like a mother he fed the hungry multitude. He pointed to God's *ganda ng loob* (gracious goodness) in his parables: the shepherd who leaves behind ninety-nine sheep to look for the lost sheep; the father who lovingly awaits the coming home of his prodigal son.

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[30] Agnes M. Brazal, "Metaphorical Ecclesiology: Faith-based Responses to Sex Trafficking," in *Human Trafficking*, eds. Hille Haker, Lisa Cahill and Elaine Wainwright, *Concilium* 3 (2011), 94-102; "Decriminalizing Prostitution in the Philippines: A Christian Response to the Tragic?" *Hapag* 2, no. 2 (2005), 229-48. This article is my most read article in academia.edu "Cooking/Stitching Cultures: Interculturality as a Christian Feminist Peace Praxis," in *Practicing Peace: Feminist Theology of Liberation, Asian Perspectives*, eds., Judette Gallares, rc and Astrid Lobo-Gajiwala (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2011; 2015), 57-80. "Maternal Migration and Paternal Responsibility in the Philippines," in *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing our Gifts to the Table*, ed., Catholic Women Speak Network, Mahwah, (NY/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2015), 150-154.

[31] Agnes M. Brazal, "Harmonizing Power-Beauty: Gender Fluidity in the Migration Context." *Asian Christian Review* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2010), 32-46.

[32] *Loob* refers to the inner self of the person.

Jesus likewise manifested *lakas* in his fidelity to his commitment to God's reign; when he was able to withstand the criticisms of the Pharisees and the taunting of the soldiers while hanging on the cross. Jesus being ridiculed by the soldiers can be a source of inspiration and strength for fathers who are taunted by their in-laws and for communities for doing the work traditionally done by mothers such as childcare and house management.

Sociological studies reveal how women migrants and the men left behind exhibit both inner strength and gracious goodness.[33] The men left behind demonstrate *lakas* (power; strength) when they are able to trust the wife instead of suspecting her of extra-marital affairs as well as remain faithful to her; when they manage well the wife's earnings, resisting the lure of consumerism; when they are able to withstand ridicule and criticisms of those who still adhere to traditional expectations of men, and when they are able to accept the difficulty of household chores.

On the other hand, the men exhibit *ganda* (gracious goodness) as nurturers of their children, learning to combine firmness (*lakas*) with tenderness (*ganda ng loob*). Fathers who are both good providers and "mothers," produce disciplined children. Their voice, together with that of the mothers, are respected and listened to by the children.

On their part, women who migrate manifest *lakas* (power; strength) in their hopeful risk taking, notwithstanding what awaits them in the host country. They demonstrate *lakas* when they endure the loneliness of physical separation from their loved ones and in their steadfast fidelity to their commitment to the welfare of their families. They exhibit *ganda* (gracious goodness) as they try to continue to be mothers to their children and show their affection

[33] See for instance, Alicia Tadeo Pingol, *Remaking Masculinities: Identity, Power, and Gender Dynamics in Families with Migrant Wives and Househusbands* (Quezon City: University Center for Women's Studies, University of the Philippines, 2001); Rachel Salazar-Parrenas, "The Gender Paradox in the Transnational Families of Filipino Migrant Women." *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, vol. 14, no. 3, (2005): 256-57.

for them even from afar. A parallel thing can be said of husbands who migrate and of women who are left behind. All are called in their specific context, to be expressions of Christ's *Lakas-Ganda*.[34]

Migration: Crossing Borders, Building Bridges[37]

While in Leuven, I did my apostolate with an organization of migrants, the *Samahan ng mga Manggagawang Pilipino sa Belgium* (Association of Philippine Migrant Workers in Belgium). But my initial attempt in systematically reflecting on the issue of migration was for the 2003 MWI-Institute of Missiology, Missio-Aachen's international academic essay contest for Contextual Theology and Philosophy on the theme "Religious Identity and Migration," where my essay "Beyond the Religious and Social Divide: the Emerging Mindanawon Identity" won the prize.[35] My focus on the issue of migration was sustained through my collaboration with the various programs of the Scalabrini Migration Center in Manila and the Episcopal Commission on Migrants and Itinerant Peoples. I helped conceptualize and coordinated in 2007 the Migration Theology program of the Scalabrinians in coordination with the Maryhill School of Theology, that was later moved to the Loyola School of Theology.

A fruit of all these engagements, aside from book chapters and journal articles, were a co-authored book with my husband Emmanuel de Guzman on the *Intercultural Church: Bridge of Solidarity in the Migration context*, and three co-edited books on migration: *Living with(out) Borders, Church in the Age of Global Migration*; and *Faith on the Move*. [36]

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[34] The virtues of Lakas-Ganda are all the more needed in the devastating cases of victims of human trafficking, employer abuse, and so on.

[35] Agnes M. Brazal, "Beyond the Religious and Social Divide: the Emerging Mindanawon Identity" *Chakana: Intercultural Forum of Theology and Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2004), 7–26.

[36] With Maria Teresa Davila, eds., *Living With(out) Borders: Catholic Theological Ethics on the Migration of Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016); With Susanna Snyder and Joshua Ralston, eds., *Church in the Age of Global*

A useful framework we have employed for dealing with migration, cultural rights and the intercultural church in the book *Intercultural Church* is that of the post Marxist sociologist-philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, who theorizes cultural practice as shaped by habitus (the person's collective unconscious), field (new context) and one's capital (economic, social cultural) in the field.[37] This helps explain how the cultural practices of migrants are maintained, changed or are modified in certain contexts. Cultural practice, Bourdieu underlines, possesses logic; it is a strategic response considering one's position in the field of power that maximizes one's well-being. Within this logic the *raison d'etre* of maintaining or rejecting a traditional cultural practice in the migrant context, is rooted in how this ultimately facilitates the experience of well-being in the new context.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural practice is also useful toward a conceptual clarification of cultural rights – a relatively underdeveloped concept – as a right of the individual in social relations to negotiate between his/her culture or habitus, and the new field s/he is in, considering her social, economic, and cultural capital. It therefore does not correspond to a duty to preserve one's cultural identity.

Our book proposes the intercultural church as a vision and direction toward which churches in the context of migration can orient themselves. The intercultural church is different from the

Migration (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); With Fabio Baggio, eds., *Faith on the Move: Toward a Theology of Migration in Asia* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009).

[37] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1984), 101.

multiculturalist[38] church which assumes that culture is a total way of living, shared homogeneously by its members, crafted in a distant past and passed on to generations with minor changes. The multiculturalist church thus encourages ethnic distinctions by facilitating each group of migrants to express their faith in their cultural particularity under the leadership as well of migrants from their own countries. The intercultural church brings the multicultural church a step further by promoting opportunities for meaningful interaction among various cultural groups toward mutual enrichment and positive change in the perspective of the other.[39] An "in-beyond" or hybrid culture is possible within an

[38] We have used the term "multiculturalist" instead of multicultural because of the various meanings given to the latter. Some use the terms "multicultural" and "intercultural" interchangeably. See for instance "Characteristics of a Multicultural Church," accessed March 2012, http://www.baptist.org.uk/justice/racial-justice-resources/doc_view /1026-characteristics-of-a-multicultural-church.html. "The word multicultural is being used as a way of talking about diverse and distinct cultures living together and learning to interact with one another. It is not about each culture living separately, so creating self-contained ghettos. It is about valuing diversity, and recognizing and respecting the contributions that can be made by different cultures to each other. It is not about each culture claiming a right to be accepted uncritically. It is about all cultures engaging in critical dialogue with each other, so that all can contribute to the building of community and a cohesive society."; Michelle Vu, "Interview: Former Pastor on Segregation in the Church, Cultural Intelligence," accessed March 2012 http://www.christianpost.com /news/interview-former-pastor-on-segregation-in-the-church-cultural-intelligence-48437/._Others employ the term "multicultural" in a descriptive sense, to refer to the lived reality of diversity as a consequence of migration, and "intercultural" to mean the ideal quality of communication or interaction between these groups. See for instance the 2010 World Council of Churches message on migration. "Report of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Consultation on Mission and Ecclesiology of the Migrant Churches," *International Review of Mission* 100, no. 1 (April 2011): 104–11.

[39] "What is the Intercultural Church?"(Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2009), accessed March 2012, http://www.united-church.ca/files/intercultural/what-is.pdf.; On major features of

intercultural model because it presupposes a concept of culture that is dynamic, heterogeneous, and negotiated within a field of power relations. The intercultural church as bridge of solidarity facilitates the meeting and alliances of different cultural groups, confessions, faiths, or religions for the common good. An intercultural church is also a site where both the national Christians and the immigrants can forge an in-beyond identity as church.

CYBERETHICS/THEOLOGY: BRIDGING VIRTUAL WORLDS

Cybertechnology has likewise bridged distance, particularly geographical distance, as well as, cultural worlds. The internet has been a blessing for us theologians in the two-thirds world for it has allowed us, for instance, in the Philippines and in Asia to have more access to theological resources, and has facilitated communication and coordination with theologians from other parts of the world. The EWA prides itself for organizing all of its conferences solely via email, that is, without face to face meeting in between conferences, which would have been almost impossible in the pre-internet age. It was not therefore difficult for EWA to take up my suggestion to focus on cyberspace and Asian women, for the 5th biennial conference held in 2011 (with the official theme, "Wired Asia: Toward an Asian Feminist Theology of Human Connectivity"). Selected conference papers were published in the anthology, *Feminist Cyberethics in Asia*.

The Internet, however, is very far from being a space for utopia. The virtual world reflects too well the dominating social structures present in society. In the cyborg society, class-ism, and other forms of domination as sexism, racism and ethnocentrism are not necessarily dissolved, but they are instead rearticulated in new

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"interculturality" as identified by the International Network on Cultural Policy, see Annual Ministerial Meetings, "Interculturality Moving Towards a Dialogue Among Nation," International Network on Cultural Policy, accessed May 2005, http://incp-ripc.org/meetings/2003/theme3_inter_e.shtml.; see also Bob Rasmussen, "Leading your Church through Intercultural Transformation," accessed March 2012, http://usmin.onechallenge.org/intercultural-helps/intercultural transformation.

forms.[40] Excluded from cyberspace are the "nobodies" or those in urban and rural regions who are on the other side of the "digital divide,"[41] bypassed by information and communication technologies, which Manuel Castells refers to as the "fourth world."[42] Furthermore, masculinist interests and stereotypes create a distinct digital gender divide. In the developing world, women are nearly 25 percent less likely to use the Internet than men.[43] Liberation struggles in the 21st century will not only have to be waged in the concrete world but also in the virtual realm.

My own theologizing on the cyberworld focuses not only on ethics[44] but also systematic themes as theological anthropology, Christology, spirituality, and ecclesiology. I have elaborated on the importance of Donna Haraway's concept of a cyborg for a feminist theological anthropology and spirituality of communication.[45] Haraway, a pioneer in cyborg theory, describes the cyborg in her 1985 article entitled "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" as a hybrid creature of machine and organism that transgresses the boundaries between

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[40] See Shirley Soh, "Reading the Cyborg in Singapore: Technology, Gender, and Empowerment," in *Feminist Cyberethics in Asia*, 38-39.

[41] Digital divide refers to people's unequal ability to maximize the use of technology to better their lives because of economic, technical or socio-cultural status that limits people's access to and usage of computer-mediated communication.

[42] Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 68–168. See also Radhika Gajjala, ed. *Cyberculture and the Subaltern: Weavings of the Virtual and Real* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013). According to the 2013 World Internet Usage and Population Statistics study, only 39 percent of the population of the world is wired. Access to the Internet in North America is almost four times that of Africa. "Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics," http://www.Internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.

[43] See "Women and the Web: Bridging the Internet Gap and Creating New Global Opportunities in Low and Middle-income Countries," 10, http://www.intel.ph/.

[44] See Agnes M. Brazal, "*Pacem in Terris* in a Digital Age." *Australian e-journal of Theology* 21, no. 1 (April 2014): 1-14.

[45] Agnes M. Brazal, "A Cyborg Spirituality and its Theo-Anthropological Foundation," in *Feminist Cyberethics in Asia*, 199-219.

animal-human (organism) and machine, male/female, the physical/non-physical and so on.[46] Haraway, however, dislikes the fascination with techno-enhancement by any means, to do away with the body, pain, and suffering.[47]

Andrea Vicini and I proposed in a co-authored essay that in the cyber-era, the "body of Christ" metaphor could guide our reflection on corporeality and on the human because it refers not just to the human body of Jesus Christ, but also to the Eucharist, to the Church, and to the eschatological body of Christ in creation. By emphasizing the importance of embodiment, it implies a rejection of cybergnostic anthropologies that would separate the body from the self or foster fleeing from suffering bodies. The cosmos and the Eucharist as sacraments of the Body of Christ allow us to identify possible instances of sacralization or animation by the Holy Spirit within the Net and of cyborgs. Difference and solidarity in the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 11:21-22; 12: 12-31) highlight not only the diversity of cyborgs but demand avoiding replicating in the Net any social structure of domination because of our fundamental unity and interdependence.

Based on interviews of Filipin@ migrants in Saudi Arabia who are prohibited from worshipping publicly or even those in the United Arab Emirates who live far from the areas of worship, priest-theologian Randy Odchigue and I also explored the promise of a cyber-church in its capacity to reach out to those who are cut off from their physical faith communities.[48] Cyberchurches are

[46] Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–81.

[47] Nicholas Gane, "When We Have Never Been Human: What Is to Be Done? Interview with Donna Haraway," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 23 (2006), 135–58, at 146, 151. Moreover, though she uses the term "post-gender" in "A Cyborg Manifesto," she does not take it to mean in a "utopian beyond-masculine-and-feminine-sense", Donna J. Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 329.

[48]Agnes Brazal and Randy Odchigue, "Cyber-Church and Filipin@ Migrants in the Middle East." In *Church in the Age of Global*

liquid[49] and provisionary but they respond to a lacuna where migrants look for a space to encounter the sacred in their deterritorialized lives often bereft of concrete communal religious solidarity. Even then, cyber-churches should not be so liquid as to preclude flesh and blood solidarity, especially in terms of forging collective prophetic praxis when and where it is called for. That being said, it is equally important to consider how cyberchurches contain essential elements of what constitute a church.[50]

ECOLOGY AND DISASTER THEOLOGY: BRIDGING NATURE, THE POOR, CULTURE AND THEOLOGY

Last but not least of my research interest is that of ecological and disaster theology. I have always been interested in the intersection of ecology and feminism but my more recent research interest in disaster theology is an offshoot of a personal experience of almost drowning during the 2009 typhoon Ketsana which poured out one month rainfall in 6 hours,[51] as well as, my realization that our country's location in an earthquake and typhoon belt combined with the widespread poverty make it as one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. On November

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Migration: A Moving Body, eds., Susanna Snyder, Joshua Ralston and Agnes Brazal (N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 187-199.

[49] UK-based Anglican author Pete Ward claims that with the coming of liquid modernity, the church as a sociological concept seems to experience dissolution in its institutional religiosity and, as such, is challenged to recognize and nurture de-institutionalized forms of Christian faith. See Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Paternoster, 2002).

[50] Joseph Komonchak points out that *Lumen Gentium*, especially nos. 23 and 26, identify constitutive principles of the church: the call of God, the grace of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the Gospel, the celebration of the Eucharist, the fellowship of the community in love, and the apostolic ministry. Joseph Komonchak, "Ministry and Local Church," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 36 (1981): 58.

[51] See my account, "De zondvloed in Manilla," *Streven* (June, 2011): 529-31.

8, 2013, the strongest typhoon recorded to ever hit land razed through Central Philippines.

The unexpected "wilderness" that climate change brings about requires the development of virtues which can help us deal more adequately with this challenge. One ecological character disposition that I explored, in the context of the supertyphoon Haiyan – based on an interview of the survivors in communities along the shores in Tacloban – is resilience.[52] Filipinos are used to natural hazards as typhoons and earthquakes and have thus developed a certain form of resilience.

Employing discourse analysis, I examined representations of resilience in various fields/disciplines (ecology, climate change adaptation, neo-liberal discourse, and psycho-social theories) with particular attention to what they can contribute in understanding resilience's significance as a character trait or constellation of traits especially in the context of climate change. Employing a hermeneutics of suspicion, I criticized the co-optation of resilience in neo-liberal discourse's use of it to support what Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism,",[53] and as an ideology to abdicate care in the belief that people can simply bounce back and self-correct without outside aid.

I then focused on rearticulating resilience as an ecological virtue, distinguishing its similarity and difference from other resilience discourses, how it compares with Thomas Aquinas' concept of the virtue of fortitude and its relation to other virtues, and provided examples of its manifestation among the Haiyan survivors and their communities.

With climate change as one of the most serious problems facing the world today, especially for vulnerable countries like the Philippines, it is likely that I will continue with my research in this field.

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[52]Agnes M. Brazal, "Resilience: Virtue in an Unexpected Wilderness," in *An Unexpected Wilderness: Christianity and the Natural World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 49-68.

[53]Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Canada: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

Transforming the Theological Research Climate in the Philippines/Asia by "Bridging" Theologians

When I came back to the Philip/pines after my PhD studies, there was little support existing at that time for doing theology. There was very limited opportunity for publishing academic books, and no existing theological association. There were four initiatives I got involved in, which helped not only myself personally, but other theologians as well in the region.

First, a group of Leuven alumni and I co-founded the DaKaTeo (Catholic Theological Society in the Philippines) in 2002. DaKaTeo sees its primary contribution not only in providing a space for theological reflections and praxis but also in fostering a "writing culture" among theologians. Oftentimes, Filipino theologians, after obtaining their license or doctoral degrees, have difficulties finding time to write theological articles. The association is a support as well as a "pressure" group for theologians to continue producing creative and relevant theological research. It is a joke in Dakateo that here, "we pay... to be pressured to write... and then to be critiqued!"

The second association I helped organized as its first coordinator, as mentioned earlier, is the Ecclesia of Women in Asia that was also formed in 2002. Both associations have helped sustain my research and scholarship and those of others. Since its inception, we have published at the DaKaTeo a total of seven anthologies and in EWA a total of five anthologies. I also facilitated the process for both associations' membership with the International Network for Societies in Catholic Theology.

Thirdly, I also became a member of the planning committee of the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church since 2007. My involvement in the CTEWC helped broaden my awareness of and collaboration with ethicists from different continents, as well as, expand my work in ethics. Through it, we

likewise promoted the voices of theologians from the majority world and nurtured future theological ethicists.[54]

Lastly, I had the opportunity of helping initiate a Theology and Religious Studies Series for the Ateneo de Manila University Press. This series invites theological manuscripts that engage in interdisciplinary conversations. As its first editor, we have released more than ten books since its inception in 2006 and have added to the possibilities for publication open to theologians.

Concluding Remarks

Being a lay theologian was not something I set up to do when I was young. I was led to this vocation, inspired by Jesus of Nazareth, and was prepared for it through my various life experiences. My background as a social activist and training as an organizer in my younger years explain my passion for liberationist-postcolonial issues as well as my interest in connecting peoples, and "building bridges" between theologians, disciplines, praxis/cultures, and communities. In my case, the vocation of being a theologian involves more than just academic research and teaching; it includes mentoring, collaboration, and institution-building. In line with the liberationist perspective that I imbibed in my younger years, I continue to hold that theology should ultimately lead to liberating praxis and the transformation of society (inclusive of the academe) in the image of God's Reign.

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[54]Agnes M. Brazal, "Theological Ethics in Asia after Padova," http://www.catholicethics.com/forum-submissions/theological-ethics-in-asia-after padova?utm_source=July+1%2C+2016&utm_campaign=CTEWC+Constant+Contact+&utm_medium=email.