

NOEL CHRISTIAN A. MORATILLA

THEOLOGIZING LITERATURE: READING THE POEMS OF KIM CHI HA
AND AMADO HERNANDEZ THROUGH THE LENS OF LIBERATION
THEOLOGY

Noel Christian A. Moratilla

University of the Philippines, Asian Center, Diliman, Philippines.

E-mail: nomorat@yahoo.com, namoratilla@up.edu.ph

Abstract: History is replete with examples of how literature can be a critical strategy for calling out abuses, exposing forms of oppression, and envisioning democratic futures. Two poets of note—South Korea’s Kim Chi Ha and the Philippines’ Amado Hernandez—served as their respective societies’ conscience for their unequivocal commitment to justice and equality. Both suffered incarceration for their political and literary activities, but are now vindicated, their works considered timeless paeans to genuine freedom and democracy. In this paper, I analyze the poems of these two important literary figures through the lens of Liberation Theology, in particular the notion of resistance as the fusion of the discourses of critique and possibility, of denunciation and annunciation. This suggests that while some poems can be read as powerful execrations against oppression and injustice, there are also poems expressing that more humanizing conditions are possible. The paper concludes that this dialectic of Liberation Theology may be employed in interrogating other cultural forms and practices.

Key words: Kim Chi Ha, Amado V. Hernandez, Liberation Theology, Asian poetry.

1. Introduction: The Church at the Crossroads

Marx famously declared, “Religion is the opiate of the masses, the sigh of the oppressed”—something that hardcore, reductionist Marxists liberally invoke to justify their call for the abolition of religion. The German philosopher, however, was not directly calling for the abolition of religion, but for eliminating the basis of religious beliefs—indeed the inegalitarian structures that bring about the “frustration which religion merely expresses and mythologizes” (Dupre 1968). As asserted by Cornel West (1999), Marx looked at religion as a “profound human response to, and protest against, intolerable conditions” (373). If there is anything in religion that needs to be critically scrutinized, it is the reactionary elements that preach against the possibility of social transformation and, therefore, insist on the maintenance of the status quo. These elements do so by subtle strategies, including the overemphasis on ritualism as an integral dimension of theological dogmatism, instead of underscoring the need to live out the faith through the more concrete examples of empathic service and sacrifice from justice and freedom.

With the rise of progressive politics in the 20th century, certain elements within the Roman Catholic Church felt the need to rework its doctrines in response to shifting political and cultural contexts. It was around this time that Liberation Theology, one of the most radical innovations by conscientized theologians, was born. Praxis-oriented clerics like Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff wrote books and treatises reinterpreting Christian doctrines in light of political and economic realities that have institutionalized deep social cleavages and the immiseration of many.

As a philosophy that humanizes Christian teachings, Liberation Theology is primarily about denouncing social injustice, upbraiding the very agents of injustice and inequality while taking the side of the victims. Liberation Theology posits that Christianity is not about being passive or keeping mum in the midst of injustice, because silence and passivity under such conditions are nothing short of complicity. It has provided critical lenses through which cultural practices may be viewed, in particular a framework of resistance concatenating the hermeneutics of suspicion with the hermeneutics of recovery (Moylan 1991/1992). Here, theology as “utopian vision” is forged by the critical nexus between denunciation and annunciation. As explained by Kirylo and Boyd (2017), “First, the utopian vision requires one to denounce the unjust and dehumanizing structures currently oppressing people. Second, the utopian vision moves one to announce that a just and humanizing structure is possible.” (Kirylo and Boyd 2017: 49)

This two-pronged approach to resistance is an alternative to contemporary critical theories that brush aside the possibility of overturning, or at least undermining, structures of injustice and oppression. In such cases, what emerges is not a politics of hope and possibility, but of fear, despair and cynicism (Giroux 2001). Putting it into perspective, we should not think of utopia as the realm of the ideal or the impossible, but one that is processual, open-ended, and rendered concrete by the acknowledgment of the *here and now*, as well as the need to address ever-present conditions of inequality in its many forms.

I submit that the framework, given the overriding message of political struggle and redemption, can be used in analyzing the selected works of two of Asia's iconic practitioners of committed literature – Kim Chi Ha of South Korea and Amado V. Hernandez of the Philippines. Their respective countries have had long diplomatic ties which began during the Korean War when the Philippines, a former colony and staunch ally of the United States, sent its troops to fight on the side of the Americans and stem the spread of communism in the peninsula. After the war, the two countries dealt with US interventionism which promoted, or countenanced at least, the deployment of draconian measures against suspected communists. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, critical writers such as Kim and Hernandez suffered harassment, intimidation, and imprisonment in the hands of leaders carrying out aggressive—and often brutal—anti-communist policies (Lyo 2012; McCoy 2009). Since then, the two countries seem to have taken different trajectories, with once-backward and war-damaged South Korea becoming one of the world's most industrialized countries, whereas the Philippines, on the contrary, has dealt with serious economic and political problems partly attributable to its long colonial experience.

2. Literature of Commitment: Amado V. Hernandez and Kim Chi Ha

There is no account of any meeting ever taking place between Kim and Hernandez, but their lived experiences and *oeuvres* share certain characteristics. For one thing, both Hernandez and Kim were incarcerated for their defiance of what they perceived to be the excesses of power and their commitment to the struggle against oppression and, dialectically, for freedom and democracy. They are both militant dreamers whose imprisonment, as well as the attendant emotional anguish and physical torture, did not dampen their earnest desire to see their people live in better, genuinely egalitarian conditions. In what follows, I shall be discussing selected poems composed by these two great poets. In particular, I shall be reading their work through the lens of Liberation Theology. It is because while Hernandez and Kim fought against oppression and abuse of authority, there is one more characteristic that

binds them together—an abiding Christian praxeology as expressed in not a few of their poems.

A short-story writer, novelist, and poet, Amado Hernandez (1903-1970) is considered one of the most iconic of Filipino writers. While he came of age during the American colonial period and was tutored by American teachers, he opted to write his stories, poems, and essays in Tagalog, one of the more popular local languages, thus championing the use of the vernacular in literature while his contemporaries were writing in the borrowed language. He was also a passionate labor leader and, during the Cold War, occupied key positions in the Congress of Labor Organizations (CLO), allegedly a front of the Communist Party of the Philippines, for which he was incarcerated under the pro-American administration of President Elpidio Quirino. He hardly dissembled his commitment to and sympathy for the masses, even at the risk of incurring the ire of authorities. At his trial, Hernandez said: “I am innocent of the charges and someday, my son will realise this and be proud of his father who refused, like some labour leaders, to grovel in the dust and (served) the working masses” (*Manila Times* 1952, qtd. in Lee n.d., 58). He was twice elected councilor in one of the districts of Manila, championing the causes of workers and other marginalized segments of society. He died in 1970 but he continued to cast a spell on succeeding generations of young activists, including those who would wage resistance against Ferdinand Marcos’ martial law administration. Ironically, it was the same administration that posthumously conferred on him the National Artist Award for Literature, the highest state recognition for a Filipino writer. While Ka Amado, as he was fondly called by fellow progressives, was accused of having communist sympathies, he would make no qualms about invoking his faith. In response to a Catholic priest’s allegation that Ka Amado was a “die-hard communist,” the celebrated political prisoner wrote a letter to the supervisor explaining his side: “While I am not an ideal Catholic, I am nonetheless a Catholic, just a simple member of the flock and absolutely not a ‘die-hard communist’” (Cruz 1971, 268).

The fraught history of South Korea’s literary scene cannot be complete without the mention of Kim Chi Ha (1941-), a Korean writer who enjoys the enviable reputation of having been imprisoned, tortured, and sentenced to death by the oppressive dispensations he chose to defy. Kim’s student life in Seoul was disrupted by his involvement in social activism in the early 1960s (Killen 1978). At a time when South Korea was ruled by military officers under the aegis of American imperial power, Kim was one of those who served as beacons of hope during this dark political period. Like Hernandez, Kim never espoused the communist doctrine although he was repeatedly accused as being one by the authoritarian governments that he censured in his writings. Kim became a Catholic in 1974, but even before that year, his consideration of the Catholic faith was already reflected in his poems. He did not consider himself as a radical,

but rather as a “humorous optimist” (Suh 2007, 66). According to a declassified document from the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, which subjected Kim to a lengthy and rigorous series of interrogations, the poet is said to have declared, “Anyone who examines the material will see my values: my hatred of oppression and exploitation, my groping in the political wilderness for a way out of these iniquities, how I have driven myself in the quest for answers! This search has nothing to do with communism” (Cummings). Simply put, the writings of Kim resonate with some of the basic tenets of communism, but unlike self-avowed communists, he was no hard-core ideologue. As Killen put it: “A charismatic figure who uses the forms of shaman incantations and rich Korean colloquialisms in his poetry, Kim Chi Ha is the only Asian poet to combine the essence of Christian socialism with his native tradition” (Killen 1978, 53).

3. Problematizing Resistance

As pointed out, resistance should be two-fold, consisting of both denunciation and annunciation. Resistance does not merely denounce or condemn instances of injustice at every turn; it should also be one that future-oriented, insurrecting possibilities for an enduringly just and egalitarian world. Both Hernandez and Kim were prolific writers who produced books now considered classics, but for this paper I am focusing on the poems found in two collections. Translated into English by fellow Philippine National Artist for Literature Cirilo F. Bautista, Hernandez’ poems are culled from *Bullets and Roses* (henceforth, *B&R*) published by the De La Salle University in 2003. The poems of Kim Chi Ha’s are from *Heart’s Agony* (henceforth, *HA*) translated into English by Won-Chung Kim and James Han and published by White Pine Press in 1998.

Many of the poems articulate criticisms of the excesses of power and abuse by political authority, thus reflecting a key precept of Liberation Theology. What can be extrapolated from the life stories and the works of Hernandez and Kim Chi Ha is the idea of the committed writer playing the emulable and exemplary role of society’s conscience. With their status and reputation as critically acclaimed writers, they could have just stood on the sidelines and kept quiet about the prevalence of oppression in their respective societies; instead, they composed parrhesianic poetry on behalf of his people. But inasmuch as a poem is polysemic, I would like to avoid the trap of employing a strictly biographical approach to the analysis of the materials cited herein. In other words, I am not equating the persona with the author even if in certain instances, there may be clear allusions to the author’s lived experience. I invoke Roland Barthes’ oft-cited credo about the death of the author to emphasize the susceptibility of a text to interpretations other than that of its creator (Barthes 1977).

The table below shows the selected poems of the two authors, which are analyzed in this article:

Kim Chi Ha	Amado V. Hernandez
Brook	Tranquility
Never Will You Return	An Armstretch of Sky
At the Field	Victory
Hell 2	Paradox
New Church	Christ
Sooyu-Ri Diary	Beauty of the Comet

My analysis is guided by the following brief questions: What are the political concerns foregrounded in/by the selected poems of Amado Hernandez and Kim Chi Ha? How can the poems be read in light of Liberation Theology as messages of struggle and redemption? How is resistance—one that fuses the discourses of denunciation and annunciation—illustrated in the poems? Informed by these questions, the analysis is organized according to thematic concerns gleaned from the selected materials, including the decrial of oppression but also the assertive expression of solidarity and collective hope.

4. Prison and Abuse of Authority

As expected, the theme of imprisonment figures prominently in not a few of the poems, given the fact that both Kim and Hernandez experienced incarceration for the political causes they boldly espoused. The personae may not necessarily be just Kim and Ka Amado, but anyone who is subjected to imprisonment—in the literal and figurative sense—under an oppressive dispensation. Prison, in this regard, serves as a trope for the harsh realities of disenfranchisement and poverty that find productive breeding ground in an inequalitarian, oppressive society. In clarifying his controversial observation about Auschwitz, Theodor Adorno (1973) writes, “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream” (362). But expression should not just be limited to a mere conveyance of emotions; instead, it should announce, or at the very least insinuate the moral imperative of ending injustice and removing its trappings or, ultimately, the need to transform society. In the poems cited below, it is the language of denunciation that emboldens the personae to speak out against turpitude and tyranny in a tone that is, dialectically, personal and collective.

In Kim’s “Brook,” the persona relates the abduction of a friend by the police at early dawn. The time of day for committing the act was strategic: the perpetrators knew that in thin darkness, they would meet little resistance, thus making the abduction as dastardly as it was criminal. Poignantly reflected here are the refusal to keep quiet and the

determination to fight back– “He left his burning eyes/ While being dragged away:/ Man is not an animal” (HA, 47). The repeated cry (“Man is not an animal”) is a piquant expression of the persona’s unwillingness to be tied down and violated by the oppressor. Some of the lines also illustrate the gravity of the crime, as can be deduced from the following passage: “The sun-bleached mud walls cried./ The hills, the winding roads,/ And the wild azaleas in the mountains/ Whose snow melts in my bosom/ Cried, cried, cried” (HA, 47). The implied message is that even nature itself was distraught by the offenses perpetrated by the oppressor because of which there is no option other than bold defiance. To further appreciate the poem, the words of Walter Benjamin on a sense of “permanent emergency” against oppressive forces are instructive: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule... Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle...” (Benjamin 1968, 257).

Imprisonment, of course, does not only take a heavy toll on the prisoner himself, because family members and friends also have to come to grips with their loved one’s detention, draining their own resources, energies, and patience. Amado Hernandez’ “Tranquility” is a heart-rending narration of a day in the life of a prisoner. In particular, it is the day of his family’s visit. The first stanza gives us an idea of the said family’s status – “they (mother and child) had nothing to bring for a present,/ and had to borrow money for the bus fare....” (B&R, 81). It shows how such a gesture – the rare visit of a loved one – could serve as a consolation for the lowly detainee whose every day is overwhelmed by feelings of ennui, bitterness, and despair assuaged only by the sight of a family member or a friend. But such consolations are, of course, transitory, and as soon as his visitors leave, he plunges once again into profound despair. But as the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1959), himself a political prisoner, reminds us, “In the light of our supreme purpose, all our personal privations and disappointments are trivial” (128).

“An Armstretch of Sky,” also by Hernandez, is a proverbial *tour de force* and arguably the most celebrated of Ka Amado’s poems, still memorialized through recitation or performance in not a few street demonstrations in the Philippines. At the outset, the persona deplors his imprisonment by a “crafty leader” who wants to “enchain” his spirit, thinking that his detention could effectively weaken one’s resolve. He then sets out to describe his place of incarceration (a “cruel fort” made of stone, steel, bullet) and his condition (“completely removed from the entire world/, and though still alive, was considered dead”) in order to underscore the futility of existence when rendered immobile by imprisonment (B&R, 111). The psychological torture is just as horrendous: the cry of a fellow prisoner sounds like “an animal’s desperate roar” and

injects constant fear into the persona's heart. And because his movement is restricted, days pass by like heavy chains dragged by "bloody feet." But in true dialectic fashion, the persona, while obviously fazed by the ordeal, sees his incarceration as part of the struggle and a source of strength: "this enchantment does not defeat" (B&R, 113). It is by no means a simple "deus ex machine" scenario but one characterized by the upheaval of an oppressed people acting as one to topple tyranny: "people rise in arms/ and revenge whenever there is a Bastille."

5. Resilience, Vigilance and Courage

Implicated in the conditions of terror and injustice is the potential struggle against these very conditions—thus, typifying the dialectic process at work. As suggested in some of the poems, no regime, however fearsome, can wield enough power to ward off any form of dissent completely. Couched in the language of poetry are powerful exhortations to take action. History, after all, is replete with cases of tyranny whose abuses precipitated their own dismantling through the concerted efforts of emboldened citizens. The suggestion here is that denunciation should not only be about condemning *already existing* abuse of power. Rather, the language of denunciation should also include remonstrances even against the potential undermining of freedom and, by extension, human dignity in the hands of oppressors. Oppression, after all, is not always flagrant and conspicuous but subtle and incremental, and should thus be consistently unmasked. In "Never Will You Return" by Kim, the persona is telling the addressee about not falling asleep, which could be interpreted as not relapsing into passivity and fear. The poem seems to be telling the addressee to be constantly vigilant so as not to allow tyranny to rear its ugly head anew. Unlike many of Kim's other poems that smack of defeatism, this particular poem seems to suggest that liberation has already been achieved and should, therefore, be defended and guarded against any attempt to take it away again. The persona knows too well that there are elements threatening the existence and enjoyment of that freedom—those "(s)trange faces, hands, and gestures" that (m)ock you freely" and "attack you with a fathomless dizziness" (HA, 50). It is unfortunate, however, that in the process of achieving emancipation, many of his comrades dropped by the wayside: "Many of my friends/ Fell into that shameful sleep/ And regretfully passed away,/ The very friends/ Who were so good to me/ Sharing smiles as well as tears" (HA, 50-51). And in this light, the poem begins and ends with the same call to remain watchful against the forces of tyranny and destruction: "Ah! Never, never will you return/ If you fall asleep in this room" (HA, 51). One can be reminded of Edward Said's (2000) interesting take on intellectual vigilance and sleeplessness: "For me, sleep is death, as is any diminishment in awareness... Sleeplessness for me is a cherished state to be desired at

almost any cost... I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance" (Said 2000, 414-415).

The poem "Victory" by Hernandez immediately dispels capitulation and subservience as the only options. The persona's courage remains unstinting as if no amount of intimidation, even the very possibility of death, could faze him into silence and complacency: "There are successful struggles unknissed by success,/ it is not enough that they break the darkness." For him, the most gruesome form of punishment is a better, more noble alternative than spineless submission to the forces of evil: "I am thankful though my reward may be the gallows" (B&R, 161). Nothing can actually break his will if such a sacrifice is for a worthy, honorable cause, no matter the consequence. He lives his existence well unlike the indifferent and the apathetic who, in the words of Gramsci, live lives of "parasitism" and "cowardice" (qtd. in Choplin and Ciavolella 2017, 317-318).

6. Empathy and Solidarity

Ending oppression and, where necessary, taking apart its enabling apparatuses can only be done through collective action which begins when an aggrieved people develops a sense of empathy for each other, cultivating feelings of compassion and understanding for those who directly bear the brunt of oppression. One's experience of injustice, especially when committed or promoted by authorities, should cease to be private and insinuate itself into the public sphere, making certain that the culprits, even if they occupy positions of power, are held accountable in the people's collective memory. Here, both denunciation and annunciation are given form as the authors and agents of tyranny are called to task, but the outrage becomes a reason for society's marginal denizens (the field folk in most of Kim's poems, and the urban laborers in Hernandez') to articulate—indeed to announce—solidarity among these subaltern segments as the perfect counterpoise against autocratic tendencies.

In "At the Field" by Kim, the idea is that the struggle against injustice is always already collective because it implicates one into other people's narratives of suffering. The suffering, in other words, is synecdochically communal, a "polyphony of voices" bound together by victimization but also by the desire to free themselves from oppression. This finds a powerful expression in the Korean term "minjung"—the dispossessed and the disenfranchised whose grievances are often consigned to the peripheries in almost any attempt to create or strengthen society (Chanju 2014, 264). The poem is about the refusal to stand idly by in the face of oppression and repression even if one is not directly affected. This critical solicitude is suggested in the following lines: "What crumbles around me? What is that shouting/ At Hantan-ri Field where the wind's beautiful white

ripples/ Kiss the sun-warmed ground?" (HA, 39). The images likewise signify the ineluctability of a long, protracted struggle given that the rulers would not wish to relinquish their power so easily, in many cases resorting to violence to perpetuate their stranglehold: "It is the sound of the brass trumpet/ Signaling the long strife/ Between fading powers and emerging ones/ And the sound of my blood boiling/ Reverberates in my ears/ And in my heart" (HA, 39).

Hernandez' "Paradox" encapsulates the injustice sustained by the capitalist system that favors a few and immiserates many, depriving workers of the opportunities they ought to receive and, worse, curtailing their civil freedoms. The paradox, in other words, is that the lifeblood of society—the heroic working class no less—does not receive its fair share. The miner-father, as described in the first stanza, for example, endures the cold with his family after mining "more carbon than he should" (B&R, 67) but losing his job in the end. The farmer, having harvested "too much too soon" (B&R, 67), has to find ways, however difficult, to relieve the pangs of hunger. This paradox, of course, is no accident: it is brought about by a vicious system in which: "the income of the exploiting class comes from the labor performed by the exploited class. There is thus a straightforward causal link between the poverty of the exploited and the affluence of the exploiter" (Wright 1990, 8).

7. Church of the Oppressed and Christ of the Masses

There are also poems in both collections that forthrightly refer to Christianity, specifically a critical Christian theology that impresses how redemption can also be achieved in this world. Here we see a kind of theologizing whose salvific message does not just concern itself with spiritual wretchedness, but also—and perhaps more so—with the stark realities of privation and inequality, of cruelty and disempowerment. Expressed in the discourse of annunciation is the liberatory character of Christianity that, for the most part, has been deemphasized by mainstream dogma and reactionary elements within religion. What is announced is a radical reimagining of the Church— i.e., the Church as a whole and not just its organization – into a haven for the poor and the downtrodden.

Kim's "Hell 2" is one of the few poems that explicitly mentions Christ, but what makes it more interesting is that the persona makes a clear qualification—i.e., the "Christ of the masses" (HA, 54). Dark, though by no means defeatist, cynicism pervades the verse as can be gleaned from the imagery: "lifeless dust," rocks growing from "clasped hands," "silence of trees" (HA, 54). This is another mordant depiction of the kind of terror imposed by the oppressor on the people, and of the extent to which fear and intimidation and harassment can impact upon human beings. But oppression is by no means a perpetual condition: it carries within itself the

seeds of its own ineluctable ruin. The Church, in this regard, plays a critical role not just in protecting her flock, but in shaping their minds to become agents of transformation (Pillay 2017).

The Church, in other words, serves as a proverbial source of relief and refuge, as illustrated in the poem “New Church” also by Kim. But the Church, in this context, does not simply point to a cold, fancy structure with its elegant marble altar. As the persona says, it is one “On the mountain,/ Open-walled/ No roof”—a Church “of grass, soil and water./New Society of Jesus” (HA, 99). In other words, the Church in this context is not the institution itself or the hierarchy that wields power within, but the people themselves, in particular the humble and the forgotten, or in the words of Gustavo Gutierrez (1983/2004), the “underside of history” (178).

“Christ” by Hernandez is a celebratory exaltation of no less than the proclaimed Messiah. But what is foregrounded here is not his divinity but his humanity, in particular his lived experiences as a human being—he who drank wine, suffered pain and anger, and was martyred in Golgotha. The message is that people identify with Christ for these very reasons. That he remains influential more than two millennia after his supposedly corporal existence is partly because the Christian narrative powerfully resonates with the narrative of ordinary people that make up the bulk of any institutional religion, Christian or otherwise. As the persona himself observes, “(P)eople/ love more/ worship more/ the real images of themselves” (B&R, 55). Humans see in Christ a mirror image, a resilient figure who eventually triumphs over human suffering and even death. Among Roman Catholics in the Philippines, the feeling of empathy with the agonizing and dying Christ may help explain the continuing popularity of the self-flagellation and other performative reenactments of Christ’s suffering on his way to Calvary, notwithstanding the institutional disapproval and, at times, even condemnation of the practice (Bautista 2017)

8. Drawing Inspiration from Nature and the Familiar

It is also interesting to note that several of Hernandez’ and Kim’s poems point to nature and familiar objects as veritable sources of inspiration for keeping the spirit of defiance alive, notwithstanding the formidable power and position of the oppressor. The message resonates with those of classic Asian verses, say of Basho and Li Bai, in that the poems point to the wondrous ability of nature to inspire the weary and dejected spirit, finding consolation in the pulchritude of things that are otherwise quotidian but can instill the right dose of spiritual and moral courage. As in the previous section, the poems here announce that there exist spaces of refuge within the bosom of nature for the tyrannized and the exploited.

In Kim's "Sooyu-Ri Diary," there are references to the mountain and the "distant forest," which have historically served as the sanctuaries of dissenters and insurgents, as they seem to lie outside the ambit of the oppressor's power. The persona fairly well depicts himself as a dreamer waiting for the "baby moon" to emerge and rise "high smoothly over the night sky" (HA, 44). It is a dream not completely unreachable, however. The persona is keenly conscious—and certain—of the victory to befall those who fight for what is right and just, as can be gleaned from the following passage: "Every mountain brook runs blood-red/ And my heart still burns,/ Burns red and white again and again" (HA, 44). In this regard, I would argue that the recurring mention of blood in the poem perfectly resonates with the Christian doctrine of redemption through the blood of Christ, the very essence of Christology, but it also evokes the images of bloodshed and violence invariably inflicted by oppressors. After all, the Church is "born from the blood of martyrs" of whom Christ himself is the paradigmatic example (Gutierrez 2007, 35). It is the narrative of the Christian suffering and sacrifice that serves as the subtext in many of the poems. However, as liberation theologians would have it, living out the faith is not just about the naïve, mechanical commemoration or reenactment of Christ's life or self-sacrifice; one's faith is rendered meaningful by authentic love, compassion, and justice which are impossible when freedoms are stifled.

The idea of "seizing the day" (given life's temporality) is reflected in "Beauty of the Comet" by Hernandez where the celestial body is deemed "more beautiful/ than the store," and whose "few flashes in the sky/ are its entire brightness,/ and a spreading flame in darkness,/ and also in great brightness vanishing" (B&R, 141). The persona is well aware that his love is a "wing of fire/ from the heavens" (B&R, 141) and, on that account, one should waste no time in expressing this sentiment. The same thing can also be said about love of justice and of humankind in general: it has to be disclosed and necessarily concretized to counter the seeming prevailment of apathy and greed that have brought about and sustained the many forms of inequality. As the persona asks towards the end of the poem: "Really, why should we waste/ the days?/ time is gold, not sand..." (B&R, 143). For one who is conscientized, even the possibility of death is not enough reason to vacillate: "(I)n moments when individuals reach the limits of their autonomy, they might at the same time affirm their autonomy through acts that lend a metaphysical meaning to their death" (Pan 2009, 225).

9. Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed selected poems by Amado Hernandez and Kim Chi-Ha based on Liberation Theology's framework of resistance fusing

the discourse of denunciation with the discourse of annunciation. Emphasis was made on the overriding themes of the selected materials, which suggest how the poems do not just voice censure against cruelty and injustice but also offer emancipatory possibilities. This means that a culture of terror and exploitation dialectically engenders courage, resilience, and solidarity among victims, inspiring each other with a desire for a more humane, tyranny-free society in which basic rights are regarded. In the poems, we see the many faces of the victim – as prisoner, as mother, as child, as activist, as laborer, as mendicant, etc., whose marginality is not self-imposed but resulting from a system that privileges the powerful, i.e., politicians or oligarchs that throw their weight around and preclude dissent as a threat to the authority of abusive power-wielders. Overall, the message of the poems squares with the imperatives of Liberation Theology whose radicalized message of Christian praxis takes stock of material conditions as it does of faith and spiritual well-being. Thus, the poems of Asia's two literary icons were analyzed through this lens. This theology likewise poses a sanguine alternative to other critical theories that downplay individual and collective agency and instead promote cynicism and despair (McLaren and Jandric 640). It is a theology that shows how the discourse of faith and redemption may be reworked for understanding, interrogating, and transforming the world. The nexus of denunciation and annunciation, of critique and hope as embodied in Liberation Theology lends itself to the critical appraisal of discursive formations and cultural practices that purport to be militant, radical, and emancipatory.

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