PEDAGOGY: TEACHING PRACTICES OF
AMERICAN COLONIAL EDUCATORS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Isabel Pefianco Martin
Department of English
Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines
mmartin@ateneo.edu

Abstract
Filipino historian and essayist Renato Constantino wrote: “With American education, the Filipinos were not only
learning a new language; they were not only forgetting their own language; they were starting to become a new
type of American.” What specific strategies did the American colonizers use to create this new type of American?
How did they use the public schools to produce their cultural clones? The answer may be found in the language
and literature teaching practices of American colonial educators in the Philippines. This paper argues that the Anglo-
American canon of literature imposed on the Filipinos would not have been as potent without its powerful partner:
colonial pedagogy.

Keywords
American colonialism, Anglo-American literature, colonial education and pedagogy, English language

About the Author
Isabel Pefianco Martin is Chair of the Department of English and Associate Professor of Language and Literature
at the School of Humanities, Ateneo de Manila University. She is a member of the Board of the Ateneo Center for
English Language Teaching (ACELT) and the Linguistic Society of the Philippines (LSP). She completed her doctoral
degree in Philippine literature at the University of the Philippines. Her fields of specialization include language and
literature education, English language teaching (ELT) management, and teacher and trainer training.

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When the Americans arrived in the Philippines, the Filipinos already had a
flourishing literature. In the first decade of American colonialism, with memories of the
revolution against Spain still fresh, secular values spread rapidly as a rejection of 300 years
of religious domination. Spanish declined but English had not yet gained a foothold. Thus,
the floodgates of literature in the native languages were flung wide open. With a newfound
freedom of expression under the American colonizers, Philippine poetry, fiction, and journalism flourished.

However, in spite of the existence of a wealth of writing by Filipinos, Philippine literature was never recognized inside the colonial classroom. It was only during the latter half of American colonialism, perhaps with the introduction of the readers of Camilo Osias and the textbook of Francisco Benitez and Paz Marquez Benitez, that the canon in the classroom opened up to Filipino writers.¹

It is easy to understand why Philippine literature was not recognized in the colonial classroom.

First of all, the Philippine literature that flourished at the beginning of the American colonial period was not in English. As it had been the policy from the start that native languages were not to be used in schools,² Philippine literature certainly had no place in the colonial classroom.

In 1925, a comprehensive study of the educational system of the Philippines (also known as the 1925 Monroe Report) reported that Filipino students had no opportunity to study in their native language. The report recommended that the native language be used as an auxiliary medium of instruction in courses such as character education, and good manners and right conduct (Board of Educational Survey 40). In spite of this, American education officials insisted on the exclusive use of English in the public schools until 1940. Such policy propelled the English language towards becoming, in the words of Renato Constantino, a “wedge that separated the Filipinos from their past” (6).

COLONIAL CANON

Other than language, a more compelling reason for barring Philippine literature from inclusion in the canon of the classroom was that Anglo-American literature best served the interests of the colonizers. In this canon, the following titles were included:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>Authors</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Song of Hiawatha, Evangeline, and The Courtship of Miles Standish</td>
<td>Henry Wadsworth Longfellow</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Alhambra</td>
<td>Washington Irving</td>
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<td>“Gettysburg Address”</td>
<td>Abraham Lincoln</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Self-Reliance”</td>
<td>Ralph Waldo Emerson</td>
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<td>Robinson Crusoe</td>
<td>Daniel Defoe</td>
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A detailed analysis of these texts, as well as the way they were taught to Filipino children, reveals the combined power of curriculum, canon, and pedagogy in promoting myths about colonial realities. These texts made natural and legitimate the illusion that colonialism existed for the sake of the colonials and not the colonizers. One would wonder, for example, why the works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were included in this canon when in the United States during the early part of Longfellow was regarded by critics as one whose poetry was shallow and too didactic (Snyder 583-4). But beginning 1904, *Evangeline* was read by all Filipino high school students. In 1911, *The Song of Hiawatha* was read by all Filipinos in all public elementary schools in the country.

Also in 1904, Filipino elementary school students began to read Washington Irving’s *The Alhambra*, a collection of stories set in a historical palace in Spain. The Alhambra was built and inhabited by Moslem kings during the 13th century. One would wonder why, among all the works of Irving, this particular one was included in the colonial canon.

A closer inspection of *Evangeline*, *The Song of Hiawatha*, and *The Alhambra*, reveals themes that directly promote American colonialism. In these texts one can almost find prescriptions for good behavior in a colonized society. *Evangeline*, for example, is the story of how the lovers Evangeline and Gabriel were separated during the time when the Acadians were ejected from their home by the English colonizers. However, the story tends to attract more attention to the romantic and sentimental portrayal of Evangeline’s ill-fated love, rather than to the anger of the Acadians at the English. In *The Song of Hiawatha*, the protagonist Hiawatha regards the English colonizers as messengers of God. In the end, Hiawatha accepts his fate, leaves his home, and entrusts to the English his fellow native Americans. Irving’s *The Alhambra* depicts colonizers as savages who destroy lives and cultures. It is interesting to note, however, that these colonizers are the very same Spanish colonizers who subjected the Filipinos to 300 years of suffering. It is thus easy to see why the text is an invaluable tool of American colonialism in the Philippines.
THE HUMAN AGENT

This Anglo-American literary canon, powerful as it might be, would not have been as potent on its own. Direct exposure to such a canon did not automatically ensure the creation of the so-called “brown Americans.” Such view presupposes that literature has a direct effect on readers, that the language of literature is transparent, thus making its meaning immediately accessible to the reader.

However, the act of reading cannot be reduced to the simple act of recovering meaning from a text. The act of reading is not the simple process of decoding some embedded message from a text. Rather, it involves what Paulo Freire describes as “reading the word-world,” where text and reader converge to produce meaning (32). Such view of reading shatters the notion of the literary text as the sole source of meaning. The reader is thus empowered; she is made co-creator.

However, as the act of reading liberates, so too does it subjugate. In the context of the colonial classroom, there is another force that intervenes in the production of meaning—the human agent, the teacher.

In 1904, Washington Irving’s *The Alhambra* and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Evangeline* were first taught to 1st year high school Filipino students. *The Merchant of Venice* and other plays by Shakespeare were introduced to 3rd year high school Filipino students. One wonders how, after only a few years of exposure to the alien English language, these students could access literary texts of such a complex language and a strange culture. The key, of course, is the teacher.

COLONIAL PEDAGOGY

During the early years of public education in the Philippines, memory work became a popular method of teaching. This was described by one school principal as the only way by which Filipino students could learn English. In 1911, she wrote the following:

We must insist that every day in his first three years of school life, the Filipino child has a dialogue lesson, and we must make him commit that lesson absolutely to memory. For instance suppose his first lesson is as brief as this:

Good morning, Pedro.
Good morning, Jose.
How are you this morning, Pedro?
Thank you, I am very well.
It would not be cruelty to animals to insist on any second grade pupil’s committing that lesson to memory. (Fee 113)

This school principal believed that, like American students, Filipinos would best learn the language, not by reading, but by memorizing dialogues, the same dialogues American children memorized in American schools. This, of course, was symptomatic of the practice by American teachers in the Philippines of importing teaching methods from the US. And why not? After all, the Philippines was a colony of the United States.

This and other mechanical methods of teaching the English language manifested itself in different pedagogical practices in the public schools: stressing eye movements in reading, asking students to read aloud, making them perform grammar drills, and expecting them to recite memorized passages. The practice became so widespread that in 1913, Dr. Paul Monroe, later appointed head of the Board of Educational Survey, wrote the following about language education in the Philippines:

Grammar seems to be too much separated from language work.... The method employed seems to be largely a question and answer method—often combined with mere memorized work. (150)

In 1925, the Board of Educational Survey, which conducted a comprehensive study of the Philippine public school system, reported similar findings:

Children in upper grades seem to have a “reciting” knowledge of more technical English grammar than most children in corresponding grades in the American schools. To what degree this helps them in speaking and writing English no one really knows. (Board of Educational Survey 239)

This mechanical method of teaching English also found its way to the teaching of literature. The 1925 Board of Educational Survey noted the following observation about a typical language-oriented literature class:

Practically an entire semester of the freshman year is given to an intensive study of “Evangeline,” a selection that can be read by an ordinary reader in two or three hours. Obviously this poem is read intensively. It is analyzed, taken to pieces, put back together, looked at from every angle, and considered in all of its relations.
Such a course in literature is really a course in intellectual analysis of the most unprofitable kind. This analytic method of teaching literature is sanctified by a long academic tradition and should provide a splendid training for the literary critic, but, as a means for developing taste for literature and an interest in reading, little can be said in its defense. (378)

In 1929, one American school teacher reported the following practice in literature classes in the Philippines:

The course in literature was a misnomer. It should have been called “The Comparative Anatomy of our Best Works.” We skinned participles and hung the pelts on the blackboard to dry. We split infinitives, in much the same manner as a husky midwestern youth splits a stick of wood. We hammered the stuffing out of the compound and complex sentences, leaving the mere shells of their selves. We took our probes and dug into the vitals of literary masterpieces, bringing their very souls to the light of day…. We analyzed sentences and defined word—in short, we completed the course, as outlined, including the most important thing: the correct manner of passing the final examinations. (“Experiences” 7)

Such teaching practice—the mechanical, language-oriented approach to analyzing literary texts—presupposes that these texts are models of good English and therefore worthy of detailed study. These practices, of course, resonate with linguistics which is perceived to be a more objective and rigorous study of language. Thus, with the authority of science, the teachers presented the Anglo-American canon, not just as examples of good English, but also of great literature.

Exposure to such a canon and pedagogy would certainly exact a toll on Philippine writing, as well on standards for Philippine literature. From the compositions of Filipino students alone, one can already see the effects of American colonial education on writing. In 1928, one English teacher observed that in writing compositions, students tended to mimic the Anglo-American writers they read in class. An example of such follows:

Amongst my female sectionmates there is one who will make my heart stop throbbing whenever I will gaze upon her. She is not pure Filipina but are what we call in the Philippines Mestiza. She have a golden kinky hair and a oblong face on which was a rare and sporadic pimples. She is not so white as plate nor so black
as Negro, but between the two, so that when the sun will shine on her face a blood running thru the arteries can be plainly seen. (Annex Teacher 17)

According to the student-writer’s English teacher, the student (who graduated valedictorian of the class) directly lifted the words “throbbing” and “oblong” from Edgar Allan Poe, although Poe did not use the term “oblong” to refer to the face of a person, but to a box. The term “sporadic,” which the student used to describe pimples, might have been taken from a biology text, or could have been a confusion with the word “dangling.” If it was an error, then the source of the word was most likely Washington Irving. The lofty tone of the paragraph, furthermore, might be traced to Matthew Arnold. The teacher added:

A vast army of literary knights—Chaucer, Poe, Irving, Kipling, Arnold, Stevenson, Tennyson, Longfellow, Johnson, Noah Webster, Shakespeare and countless others crop up continually in the written work, perhaps somewhat mangled, but recognizable nevertheless. (Annex Teacher 17)

This observation was confirmed by the General Office Supervisors of the Bureau of Education. In March 1928, they published the following statement:

The topics chosen for composition should encourage originality in thought and expression rather than reproduction of literary works. There should, of course, be nice correlations of work in literature and composition. But such a large majority of the composition topics should not be drawn from the course on literature and when the composition topic is correlated with literature, it should be so worded as to call for original thought rather than reproduction. (“Observations” 124)

Because the Anglo-American canon was presented to Filipino students as examples of great literature, writing in Philippine schools tended to imitate the language of these texts. Such an observation is not very different from those made about Philippine literature in English by such influential personalities as Dr. George Pope Shannon, who in 1928, declared that Filipino writers had a tendency for the “slavish imitation” of Anglo-American texts (6). (At that time, Dr. Shannon was the head of the English Department of the University of the Philippines and adviser of the UP Writer’s Club.)

During the latter part of American colonialism, the mechanical, language-oriented
approach to studying literature was not anymore popular. The 1933 Course of Study in Literature, which was distributed to all teachers of English in the public school system, promoted a more “literary” way of reading the texts. In this document, the objective of teaching literature was described as follows:

... to give our students a literary experience (emphasis added)—enable them most vividly to realize some part of the literary materials read. Success in teaching any bit of literature is to be measured by the keenness with which the experience there set forth is realized by the pupils. (Bureau of Secondary Education 5)

In stressing the literary experience, the teacher was now less concerned about the linguistic features of a text and more focused on the almost “natural” effect great literature had on the reader. Students were taught to appreciate literature by studying the extrinsic and intrinsic elements of a literary text. The 1933 Course of Study makes the following prescription about teaching literature:

the student should have a knowledge of a brief history of English and American literature touching only on the outstanding figures and the salient political, social, and literary characteristics of the more important periods. (56)

In a literature class, studying these “important periods” presupposes that writing is determined by “race, milieu, and moment3.” Thus, it is necessary to look into history, biography, or anything external to a literary text that is believed to have influenced its creation. It may be argued that this approach to studying literary texts, by focusing on elements extrinsic to literature, was a logical extension of the mechanical, language-oriented pedagogical practices which were presented as more rigorous, objective, and therefore, scientific. The effect, of course, is the transporting of Filipino students to a time and place unfamiliar to them. In this world, the language is foreign, the experience strange, the images mysterious. It is a world that is totally alien. However, it is also a world that represents greatness. In such a setting of high culture and civilization, would there be room for the more familiar fables, folktales, and epics? Certainly not.

But it was not just the study of context that drove a wedge between Filipino students and their own culture. An analysis of the intrinsic features of literary texts in the Anglo-American canon, in other words, the study of text as text, also propagated the myth of greatness. The view that literature is an elevated art form with the ability to naturally
express itself is apparent in the following recommendation of the 1933 Course of Study in Literature:

Lyric poetry should not be studied analytically. Do not try to make the class “thrill” over it. Instead, read the selection or have it read as rhythmically as possible, and trust the students to catch the spirit of it (emphasis added). In the advanced classes some analysis may be attempted of the more difficult types of poetry, some attention should be paid to imagery and to metrical forms, but neither should be permitted to becloud the spirit and sensuous appeal of the poem. Seldom should the reading of a beautiful passage be interrupted to explain an unknown expression. Explain or have explained the dialect and allusions before-hand. (Bureau of Secondary Education 97)

Literature, in this case, lyric poetry, is believed to possess a spirit, an essence that can be recovered by the reader. Thus, the teacher is cautioned against interrupting this “natural” process of capturing the spirit. The power, of course, to create meaning lies in the literary text and not in the reader. In a colonial setting, such approach to studying literature is potentially damaging as it reduces the student to a passive receiver, a receptacle or repository, of meaning.

CONCLUSION

As material manifestation and ideological apparatus, public education in the Philippines perpetuated the interests of American colonialism. At the same time that American colonialism promoted the Anglo-American literary canon, it also propagated approaches to teaching that would have direct benefits on the existing order. The partnership of canon and pedagogy sealed the fate of Filipino readers and writers.

Thus, the belief that public education was introduced in the Philippines for the Filipinos is in fact false. The reality is that public education, specifically language and literature education during the American colonial period, was designed to directly support American colonialism. The combined power of the canon, curriculum, and pedagogy constituted the ideological strategies resulting in rationalizing, naturalizing, and legitimizing myths about colonial relationships and realities. The Filipino experience of American colonial education must constantly remind us that language and literature education is never neutral. Education is power—the power to forge realities, the power to propel cultures, the power to interrupt life.
NOTES

1  It should be noted that these textbooks were written in English.

2  The native language (Pilipino) was not allowed to be taught in the public schools until 1940.

3  The phrase is associated with Hippolyte Taine (1828-93) which was described in Raman Selden, *Theory of Criticism: From Plato to the Present* (London: Longman, 1988) as “the first to elaborate a strictly deterministic history of literature. His first assumption is that national histories can be explained by “some very general disposition of mind and soul.” This elementary “moral state” is conditioned by environmental factors—“the race, the surroundings, and the epoch.” From the resulting disposition arises a certain “ideal model of man” which is expressed pre-eminently in literature” (419).
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