

Revisiting Paulo: Critical Pedagogy and Testimonial Narratives as Liberative Spaces in the Philippines' K-12 Curriculum

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Abstract

To the consternation and dismay of its critics, the 12-year basic education program is now in full swing in the Philippines. The concerns over the implementation of this purportedly neoliberal educational policy have included the displacement of education workers, the perennial shortage of school facilities (especially in the public schools), and financial impact on low-income families. There has also been a concern over the ostensibly western orientation of the country's educational system because of colonialism. However, as this paper argues, there are also spaces for an empowering and critical pedagogy as defined by Paulo Freire. The principles of critical pedagogy, for instance, can be deployed through the inclusion of non-canonical and insurgent literature in at least two new courses in the curriculum—21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World and Creative Nonfiction. One particular example of such literature is the testimonial narrative or testimonio, a first-person narrative about experiences of abuse and other forms of injustice. The paper includes a survey of studies that foreground the use of testimonios in education, and argues that the same strategy can be used in the Philippines' new curriculum. The use of testimonios in literature and other disciplines may constitute an attempt at locating

alternative knowledges and cultural modalities while surfacing the narratives of Philippine society's marginalized sectors.

Keywords: *critical pedagogy, 21st century literature, Philippine education, Philippine literature, K-12 , testimonio*

The Philippines' K-12 and Its Dis/Contents

For many decades, the basic education system in the Philippines had been limited to ten years (6 years in grade school and 4 years in secondary school). In 2013, then President Benigno Aquino III signed Republic Act 10533 or the *Enhanced Basic Education Act*, the primary feature of which was the introduction of “universal” kindergarten and Senior High School (SHS). The mandate was to lengthen the number of academic years in basic education by requiring students to pass through kindergarten before enrolling in grade school, and to graduate from SHS before moving on to college. The law is supposedly grounded in the expectation that “every graduate of basic education shall be an empowered individual who has learned, through a program that is rooted in sound educational principles and geared towards excellence, the foundations of learning throughout life, the competence to engage in work and be productive, the ability to coexist in fruitful harmony with local and global communities, the capability to engage in autonomous, creative, and critical thinking, and the capacity and willingness to transform others and one’s self” (Republic Act 10533). In this regard, the state shall: 1) provide “quality” education that is “globally competitive” according to a curriculum that is “pedagogically sound” and “at par with international standards”; 2) give more importance to vocational and technical career opportunities particularly in secondary education; and 3) develop education that is “learner-oriented” and takes cognizance of the needs, cognitive and cultural capacity, and the diversity of learners. Along this line, the basic education curriculum shall have the following characteristics:

- 1) learner-centered, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate;
- 2) relevant, responsive, and research-based;
- 3) culture-sensitive;
- 4) contextualized and global;
- 5) using pedagogical approaches that are constructivist, inquiry-based, reflective, collaborative, and integrative; and
- 6) flexible enough to include indigenized and localized materials.

But like any other novel measure, the introduction of the K-12 curriculum did not fail to elicit harsh reactions. For one thing, there was a well-founded anxiety concerning the employment security of education workers (teaching and non-teaching) who could end up jobless during the transition period: With tertiary institutions not getting any students for at least two years because of the addition of two years of senior high school, there was fear that several teachers and staff would be retrenched by their very institutions (Bolido 2016). True enough, several Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have put a premium on profit over education workers' welfare by offering generous retrenchment or early retirement packages instead of creating long-term, worker-friendly mechanisms to collectively address the challenges of K-12.

Parents have also been overwhelmed by fears over the additional costs in a country where financial handicap drives children out of school (Santamaria 2012)—a concern that is not without merit considering the alarming unemployment rate in the country and the number of families living in poverty. No less than the Philippine's Department of Education, the country's lead agency on basic education, has lamented that the relatively high drop-out rate is because of the students' inability to finally support their schooling. Recent surveys reveal that at the end of 2017 alone, around 10 million families, or almost 10 percent of the population, considered themselves impoverished (San

Juan 2017). Moreover, about 3.8 million Filipinos or 10 percent of Filipinos aged 6-24 years, are out of school and thus deprived of opportunities for social mobility (Philippine Statistics Authority 2017). It is rather ironic that a piece of legislative measure purportedly designed to improve education has been met with strong objections coming from its supposed beneficiaries because of grave concerns ranging from additional costs to job precarity.

There is also claim that the reengineering of the educational system could be in response to the exigencies of the labor market, aimed at hastening the entry of graduates into the labor force. K-12's explicit inclusion of the imperatives of globalization in its discourse has been construed as the unabashed promotion of labor export, which even prior to K-12, had already been perceived as the state's main job-generating mechanism. This is because under the K-12 program, the graduate already becomes ripe for employment, thus further undermining the importance of college education for selecting a career (Freedom from Debt Coalition [FDC] 2013). As one NGO puts it,

Increasing private or corporate business incursions into Philippine education has been consistently justified by the Philippine government on grounds that it lacks the money or the fiscal capacity to respond to the expanding needs of Philippine education. But public budgeting is basically a question of priority. Philippine budgets over the decades do not show education as a central priority of the government. (FDC 2013, Relinquishment of duty, para. 2)

The seemingly undue haste with which K-12 was introduced has been ascribed to government's eagerness to make the country "ready" for ASEAN regional integration to facilitate the exchange of workers among the member-states and make Filipino graduates "comparable" to their Southeast Asian counterparts. Along this line the Secretary of Education, Leonor Briones, once noted, "A PhD from the Philippines tends to be counted lower in rank versus a PhD from an

ASEAN country with 12 years basic education”(Iglesias, 2016). In other words, the introduction of K-12 was based on the profit-oriented logic of the neoliberal market that sees the educational system as a sure and unending source of labor. The K-12 mechanism is meant to enhance “the employability of the graduates as well as their readiness to pursue higher education for those entering college” (Ofreneo 2017, para. 7).

There is likewise a growing concern over the logistical readiness of the educational system for the two additional years because the perennial shortages that hound government schools in particular, such as those that pertain to the uneven ratio between classrooms and students (some schools can have as many as 60 students in classroom), have not been satisfactorily resolved. In junior high school alone, the ratio of classroom to class size was one classroom to 47 students as of school year 2014-2015 (Department of Education 2016a), and the growing number of enrollees have necessitated alternative mechanisms like the 3-shift system in some schools. The 3-shift system, nonetheless, is not without its seamy consequences for it has shortened the instruction hours and presumably compromised the quality of education. No recent study has been obtained on the effect of multiple shifting on instructional hours, but in 2001, even the World Bank observed that, under a multiple shift system, there was a 53 percent difference between the intended or required hours of instruction and the actual hours of instruction (Linden 2001).

Described by government as a measure for “making the youth more productive and competitive, not only overseas but more so in their country” (Department of Education 2017, para. 3), the implementation of the K-12 curriculum remains saddled with difficulties. Simply put, notwithstanding grandiose statements justifying the drastic changes under K-12, some of the systemic requirements to ensure its effectiveness or at least cushion its negative repercussions. have not

been adequately put in place. Add to that the well-founded concern that K-12, with its seeming emphasis on technical-vocational training, may just be another neoliberal racket for producing workers to oil the machinery of capital.

In this paper, I argue that Freire's critical pedagogy can insinuate itself into the Philippines' new K-12 curriculum which, despite strong opposition and to the dismay of its critics, has already taken effect. In other words, the K-12 curriculum, notwithstanding its ostensibly liberal-democratic rationale and pro-market objectives, can be manipulated and even reconfigured in such a way as to create spaces for critical thinking and social awareness among both learners and educators, as well as opportunities for epistemically marginalized voices to be surfaced. In particular, I expound towards the end of this paper how the use of an originally Latin American genre called *testimonios* or testimonial narratives, an increasingly recognized form of creative nonfiction, can concretize an empowering and liberative pedagogical praxis.

The Freirean Legacy

Freire's contribution towards understanding the role of politics and power relations in the educative process cannot be overemphasized. His legacy resides with the recognition of education as a contestatory, ideologically laden site but one that is also rife with possibilities for empowerment and transformation. In this regard, critical pedagogy, a term that Freire did not really invent but will forever be associated with him, constitutes a departure from at least two other popular strands of educational philosophy—first, that of liberal-humanism that underscores the role of education for individual freedom and the holistic development of human capacities, but largely eliding the structural and ideological complexity of the education system; second, that of vulgar, economistic Marxism that reduces education to a reflex of dominant “free”

market forces from which there seems to be no practicable way out (Giroux 1985).

Paulo Freire falls squarely within a long intellectual tradition of resistance and radicalism that includes Socrates, Marx, Gramsci, and Dewey whose influence can be gleaned from his books, articles, and lectures. Unlike some of the 20th century's most notable thinkers, the Brazilian educator did not just pontificate from the proverbial ivory tower and arrogate the role of the distant expert positing fuzzy propositions and theories without applying them personally. Praxis, as defined by Freire (2005) himself, demands "constant action on reality, and a reflection on this action" (p. 119). His brand of praxis, however, is not just about a revolutionary seizure of power along doctrinal party lines, but one that affirms the role of educators and learners as "organic intellectuals" who, to borrow from Gramsci, constantly engage in critical dialogue to understand and shape social reality.

Having come from humble beginnings himself (he had suffered poverty firsthand while growing up in Recife especially after his father died), Freire conceived and implemented educational policies for underprivileged segments of Brazilian society. Legendary of course are Freire's adult literacy projects that benefitted peasants in his native Brazil, which were facilitated by the literacy materials based on the peasant's own social realities. One particular project that sealed his legacy as a progressive educator was the one carried out in Angicos, a town in Brazil's northeast. The said project proved how within 40 hours, the adult workers of an underprivileged town could learn how to read, write, and raise their social consciousness through dialogue and the appreciation of their own, indigenous knowledge, including words and themes that were significant to them. Freire's unorthodox pedagogy, however, cost him his freedom and his job: as the Cold War reared its ugly head (and with it, a burgeoning anti-

communist hysteria in the Third World), he was hounded out of his country by Brazil's military rulers that took over the early 1960s as he was performing important bureaucratic positions. As an exile, he spent 15 years in Europe, the United States, and Africa. But while in exile, he completed and *published Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1989), his germinal work that forever transformed the way people looked at education. Over the years, he wrote more books, sometimes in collaboration with other scholars who came under his influence and contributed to the further enrichment of critical pedagogy as a revolutionary and liberating discourse.

Freire's critical pedagogy should not be reduced to a mere methodology, however, as it problematized more than anything else the nexus between politics and education that washitherto glossed over by more conventional perspectives and theories. As Giroux eloquently puts it,

(W)hat has to be acknowledged is that critical pedagogy is not about an a priori method that simply can be applied regardless of context. It is the outcome of particular struggles and is always related to the specificity of particular contexts, students, communities, available resources, the histories that students bring with them to the classroom, and the diverse experiences and identities they inhabit. (Tristan 2013, para. 2)

His educational philosophy is inexorably anchored in a kind of “socialist humanism” that is anchored on the ability of individuals to engage critically what takes place not just within the classroom, but also in other sites of pedagogy—say, on mass media or social media whose significance as purveyors of “knowledge/s” has undermined the dominance of the printed material in today's academic culture. Freire had a term for this critical engagement with oppressive conditions within the classroom and beyond – *conscientization*.

Like his contemporaries Althusser and Foucault, he also believed that “knowledge” is not untainted by power. But unlike them, he was of a more humanist stripe for he insisted on concretizing the concept of agency, i.e., the ability of educators and students as intellectuals and cultural workers, to contribute to social transformation—something that rubs against the grain of vulgar leftism that seems to conflate praxis with dogmatism, and views the school as being completely under the spell of the free market from which there is no exit other than the drastic dismantling of the apparatus of power. In this regard, he appropriated from liberation theology the twin concepts of *denunciation* and *annunciation* to define his framework of resistance (Webb 2013)—that is, one that minces no words about the excesses of power while announcing that a better, more egalitarian world can be achieved.

Such insights of course resonate with Marxism, but unlike it, critical pedagogy does not explicitly espouse (but not dismissing either) a violent overthrow of the system with, as Lenin put it, a vanguard party at the helm, foregrounding instead the strategies available for teachers and students to engage the world they live in, including of course the material conditions that perpetuate oppression in its many forms. Freire believed that the discourse of criticism against domination, as can be deduced from many contemporary social and political theories, has unfortunately degenerated into a discourse of despair that relegates the victim to a position of perpetual marginality. While critical pedagogy recognizes that politics is embedded in what happens within and beyond the classroom, more importantly, it acknowledges the individual and collective potentials of conscientized educators and learners in struggling for and imagining a better world. As I will show later, critical pedagogy may be deployed as a mode of resistance and empowerment by surfacing narratives of abjection and liminality.

Curriculum as Ideology

Thanks to radical thinkers like Freire, it has become axiomatic that the educational system is by no means a sphere of political neutrality, but one that is inextricably bound up with class positions, interests, and ideologies. An educational curriculum is often created and sustained under the aegis of the dominant class to perpetuate exploitative conditions. In most instances, such a curriculum works subtly in the form of a “hidden curriculum” that is “composed of the lessons that are not taught in schools but are learnt anyway” (Madhavan 2016). Literature constitutes a subject area in which these relationships of power are pronounced, exemplifying what Slattery (2006) calls a “hermeneutic decision” that involves “what authors or texts should be canonical and which should be ignored” (p. 123). This implies that “the selection of textbooks and educational media reflects a prejudice in favor of particular styles, methodologies, politics, or worldviews” (Slattery 2006, p. 116).

Renato Constantino (1970), arguably the 20th century’s foremost Filipino nationalist historian, points to the Filipino’s perennial miseducation under an educational system that, since the colonial times, has been ostensibly westernized. Colonial in orientation, Philippine education, in other words, has produced learners who

learned no longer as Filipinos but as colonials. They had to be disoriented from their nationalist goals because they had to become good colonials. The ideal colonial was the carbon copy of his conqueror, the conformist follower of the new dispensation. He had to forget his past and unlearn the nationalist virtues in order to live peacefully, if not comfortably, under the colonial order. (Constantino 1970, p. 24)

To be more specific, In the case of the Philippines’ literature and language curricula, the literature and the language of the upper and middle classes

constitute most of the lessons. If schools are “mechanisms of cultural distribution” as Apple (2004, p. 25) argues, then it is the hegemonic culture of the westernized Philippine bourgeoisie, by way of language and literature as cultural formations, that is being reproduced. One is also reminded of the knowledge-power nexus problematized by Foucault (1980), which underscores knowledge as a historically tainted manifestation of power. But as Foucault also maintains, resistance is always already within the network of power.

Auerbach (1994 as cited in Sarroub and Quadros 2015) posits “critical literacies” as “rhetoric of strengths” (p. 254) that foreground sensitivity to cultural diversity and the empowerment of otherwise subaltern collectives. Because education is a site of contestation, such literacies espouse a kind of education that recognizes and problematizes power relations not just within the four walls of the classroom but beyond. It is a view that poses a radical alternative to knowledge formations that, considering the ideological character of dominant educational institutions, are “uninterested in the contexts and processes of which a phenomenon is part” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 7). After all, the “politics of knowledge (should be) a central dimension of any curriculum, and the contrasts and comparison of different cultural perspectives on a wide array of issues (should emerge) as a familiar aspect of the study of any topic” (p. 7).

Problematizing Literature as a Colonial Project

What could be the relevance of Freire’s concepts for the K-12 curriculum, particularly those aspects that have to do with the teaching of literature? In what ways can these concepts be appropriated to make the teaching of literature more effective and, indeed, more empowering? Or for that matter, do the principles of critical pedagogy as applied in the teaching of literature still matter under the

conditions of globalization and the seeming dissolution of sociality in favor of vicious individualism (Giroux, 2016)?

We can begin by teasing out what may already be axiomatic—that the literature taught in schools, at least insofar as Philippine education is concerned, has been by and large western in orientation because of the country’s long colonial experience. During the American occupation, government placed strong emphasis on the teaching of canonical, mostly western, literature as a colonial strategy, if only to impress upon the natives that literature should measure up to western standards. According to Hardacker (2011), “(T)he US government instituted a decidedly American-style education system in the Philippines, modeled after the nation’s common school ideal” (p. 39). With colonial pedagogy and literature, Filipino students were exposed to the “spirit of Anglo-Saxon individualism” that contrasted sharply with Filipino’s collective mentality. The implication, of course, was that there was no great literature other than what the colonizers were feeding, and any deviation from the western-imposed paradigms was, as it were, of an inferior and bastard line.

McMahon (2004) observes, “In general, Philippine literature in English has suffered from very pejorative critical assessments,” which is to suggest the “general dismissal of Filipino (sic) literature in English” (p. 141). Along this line, the racist cognomen, “brown American” referring to the westernized, educated, and therefore “civilized” Filipino was created by the colonizers via the language and literature education they imposed (Martin 2008). Martin (2008) argues, “Cumulatively, canon, pedagogy, and the power of American public education in the Philippines resulted in the relegation of Philippine writing in English, as well as the writing in the native languages to the margins of the Philippine cultural experience” (p. 246). So ostensibly colonial and inclusionary was the design of the literature curriculum that even an American schoolteacher observed, “The course in literature was a misnomer. It should

have been called ‘The Comparative Anatomy of our Best Works’” (Martin 2008, p. 252). In other words, the literary selections –characteristically western, from the Greek playwrights to Dante to Shakespeare to Kipling—served as models of good English and good writing so designed to suggest the superiority of western culture.

It was not surprising, therefore, that despite their talent, canonical Filipino writers were compared with western writers, with the latter representing templates to be followed (Patajo-Legasto 1993). Colonialism vitually dictated how literature was to be viewed in terms of form, content, and language, illustrating how education can be an instrumentalized site for perpetuating forms of oppression and inequality. A typical Filipino student, therefore, became exposed to Shakespeare and the western epics instead of brooding over and familiarizing themselves with local folktales, as well as the nationalist literature of anti-colonial writers like Aurelio Tolentino and Lope K. Santos. Even noted Filipino writers in English found fault with the inexorably western orientation of literature pedagogy and of published literature itself. A celebrated fictionist, NVM Gonzalez, himself a product of American tutelage, ruefully declared that Filipino writers of that period suffered from what he called the “Jones Law syndrome”—the penchant of local writers to ingratiate themselves to US patrons and writers from whom they angled for recognition.

And while some Filipino writers, inured to the colonizer’s brand of education, fortunately acquired some recognition, the “folk” and the “masses” were excluded from the Philippine literary canon. The literatures of these largely marginalized segments suffered academic exclusion because “these types have been evaluated as belonging to a “nascent stage” in the history of Philippine literature which now has “mature” examples (though supposedly not yet as “highly developed as the western masterpieces” (Patajo-Legasto 1993, p. 39).

These excluded literatures are categorized as “minority literatures” or “literatures from the margins” that pertain to literary outputs that are excluded from academic discourse by virtue of their provenance or the subject/political positionalities inscribed in them. In other words, the very nature of these cultural/literary productions cannot be extricated from the nature and character of these groups who, said Patajo-Legasto (1993), are “judged as political and culturally ‘underdeveloped/immature,’ incapable of representing themselves; and/or labelled as ‘criminals,’ ‘subversives,’ ‘perverts,’ etc.” (p. 39). They are, to borrow a term from Spivak (1988), subjected to a kind of “epistemic violence” (p. 280).

It is no wonder why Filipino students in general could not make any connection to their lessons being taught in a foreign tongue. The reading materials, mostly dealing with American culture and contexts, were making little appeal to the native learners, because of which no less than the US colonial government’s Bureau of Educational Survey lamented that the reading lessons were producing “very little growth in the Filipino student” (Martin 2007, p. 377) and were “(retarding) rather than (promoting) the growth of reading interests” (p. 376). The educational system’s seeming lack of sensitivity to local cultures may be attributable to the American colonizers’ overemphasis on business and training:

Having adopted commercialization as a major goal and standardization as its mantra, the Philippine educational system... took on many of the characteristics of a mammoth business operation... In Philippine schools... industrial work had the quasi-vocational objective of teaching pupils handicrafts, farming techniques, and other things that would add to their future earning power. (May 2009, p. 153)

Even at present, teaching literature in the Philippines, especially in basic education, still reeks of colonialism as can be gleaned, for instance, from the way literary lessons are clustered in the junior secondary school. Literature is integrated into the teaching of English, another byproduct of colonization, but literature is classified according to geographical origin as illustrated in the table below:

Table 1. Year Levels and Classification of Literature

Level	Type of Literature
Grade 7	Philippine
Grade 8	Afro-Asian
Grade 9	British-American
Grade 10	World

In the Department of Education’s (2016b) Curriculum Guide for English, there is no explanation as to why literature is classified this way, except for a short hint somewhere in the text: “Skills, grammatical items, structures and various types of texts will be taught, revised and revisited at increasing levels of difficulty and sophistication. This will allow students to progress from the foundational level to higher levels of language use” (p. 8). The categorization only seems to reinforce, if subtly, the institutional inferiority of non-western literatures to their western counterpart, as well as the privileging of conventional literary forms. The sequencing is supposed to be grounded in the idea of expansion—that is, one should first be understandably familiar with her/his own literature before taking stock of the literature from other parts of the world. However, that Philippine literature seems to be given focus only in the initial year of secondary school, and relegated to the margins elsewhere suggests a rather unfavorable and condescending attitude towards home-grown literature as if it were the easiest and most elementary—a faint echo of the

Social Darwinism invoked by the colonizers to justify territorial expansion and, with it, the brutal subjugation of peoples. Because of the institutional neglect of local literatures, Filipino teachers and students developed a sense of “self-doubt”—that is, the overriding feeling of uncertainty about the overall quality of Philippine literature and the competence of Filipino writers in general (Martin, 2007). Note also that the Philippine literary texts and lessons taught in school are mostly in English and based on western literary forms.

Because literature is not a separate subject area, but rather integrated into the English subjects, literature in the local languages is largely ignored. While there has been a soupcon of locally produced literature in some textbooks (particularly those in first year English), these texts are mostly translated, their original message essentially diluted, or, worse, bowdlerized according to the translator’s ideational and ideological leanings. One may chance upon Tagalog must-reads like Bonifacio’s¹ “Ang Dapat Mabatid ng mga Tagalog” (first published in 1896 during the Philippine Revolution against Spain), Hernandez’s² “Isang Dipang Langit” (written in 1952), or extracts from Balagtas’s³ *Florante at Laura* (first appearing in 1838), for example, but they appear in translated, sometimes terribly recast, versions, stripped of the potency of the anti-colonial language in which they were originally written. To confound it all, these texts, for all their importance, sometimes only serve as springboards for language—that is, grammar and syntax—lessons, and not explored profoundly. Simply put, literature is reduced to a medium through which the English language is learned, thus alienating learners and mentors alike as much from the very purpose of teaching literature as from an all-important aspect of Philippine culture—i.e., Philippine literature.

It goes without saying that curriculum as an ideological process is a form of interpellation configuring the student into its intended subject. As Murillo (2017) states

We see examples of this in what I would call formal-instituted curriculum designs in which oftentimes there are explicit declarations of outcomes or characteristics of the type of person they hope to graduate (usually organized and uttered in standards, competencies or broader declarations, such as “reflective practitioner,” “skillful and flexible professional,” etc.). At the same time, there are other more informal or day-to-day practices that although... not prescribed explicitly,... are still part of the practices and discourses of the educational institution. (p. 39)

This does not mean, however, that the proverbial power of the curriculum as such is so encompassing and so pervasive that there is no opportunity for subversion or resistance. There are also proverbial cracks and gaps in the discourse that can be viewed as occasions for insurgency.

The work of Paulo Freire, primarily his insurgent pedagogy, proffers invaluable tools not just in denouncing forms of injustice but by creating spaces for defiance and emancipation. Henry Giroux (1992) likewise posits that Freire’s work may even be read as a “postcolonial text” according to its “historical and political construction” (p. 16). In other words, Freire’s insights into critical pedagogy can be appreciated further by taking into account how his work is “forged in the intersection of contingency and history” (p. 16). Given its postcolonial character, critical pedagogy can likewise be deployed in problematizing colonialism and its dubious legacies. For one thing, critical pedagogy underscores the importance of local cultures and historical situatedness to counter the hegemony of western, colonial education that de-prioritizes such crucial elements.

Along that line, every academic or student in a postcolonial society such as the Philippines can assume the role of what Giroux calls (2016) a border-crossing intellectual who “engages intellectual work not only in its specificity, but also in terms of the intellectual function itself as part of the discourse of invention and construction, rather than a discourse of recognition whose aim is reduced to revealing and transmitting universal truths” (p. 286). Generations of academics and students in the Philippines have been immured in a colonial education that has privileged western epistemes while denigrating local knowledges. Therefore, it behooves the critical educator and learner to find ways through which this aspect of colonialism is interrogated, while “insurrecting,” to employ a Foucauldian term, subaltern knowledges that the country’s traditionally western and bourgeoisie-oriented education has dismissed as inferior, irrational, and even subversive.

Spaces of Hope: 21st Century Literature and Creative Nonfiction

Fortunately, some of the additional literature subjects, particularly in Senior High School (SHS), constitute an attempt at broadening the politics of representation. There is now space for literary productions that are traditionally pushed to the peripheries—that is, those far from the customary centers of literary production and dissemination. This is in accordance with Freire’s credo that education should be a laboratory for democracy, giving voice as it were to those segments of society that have been historically, politically, economically, and epistemologically voiceless. Literature in SHS is, quite auspiciously, no longer subsumed to the learning of English, and, as they rightly should, literature subjects now concern themselves almost exclusively with *literature*. Given the flexibility of the new curriculum, there is room for the inclusion of literary materials that are not only non-canonical but also epistemologically and politically contrarian, not excluding the narratives of traditionally neglected sectors.

In the case of Freire’s literacy project, as has been intimated, the peasants learned to read and write with relative ease by creating and utilizing materials that captured their own reality—that is, through defamiliarizing the very elements of their own culture. Such a radical insight, I gather, can insinuate itself into *21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World*, a core course in SHS. Divided into two parts, the subject is designed to “engage students in appreciation and critical study of 21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World encompassing their various dimensions, genres, elements, structures, contexts, and traditions” (Department of Education 2016b, p.1). Like the Philippine literature component of English in grade 7 (formerly, first year high school), the Philippine literature aspect of 21st Century Literature also includes canonical writings (e.g., those of published writers, especially those who have been recognized as “National Artists for Literature”). But, more importantly, 21st Century Philippine Literature also articulates the need to tap literature from the regions, particularly the very region in which the school is located—a most welcome development considering that local literature had never been accorded the same kind of academic attention, except perhaps among researchers wanting to prise open this largely unknown aspect of culture. Such literature is now to be taught in school, not just researched, thus giving educators and learners the opportunity to know more about the literary production of their locality—something that would hardly find its way in conventional literary textbooks. By and large, the project illustrates the necessity of locating alternative modalities of knowledge production and reproduction, including the life histories of the very inhabitants of a region or, more specifically, of a community.

Also, there is greater democratization in 21st century literature’s inclusion of genres that, traditionally, have not been considered literary enough. In the old days, literature was limited to fiction and poetry and evaluated according to

well-entrenched formalist criteria. Any deviation would not easily pass muster with the traditionally educated literary aesthete or professor given their academic habitus and ideological repertoire. In the SHS curriculum, however, there is space for the gathering and study of “unconventional literary forms,” effacing as it were the division between literary and non-literary forms or, for that matter, complicating the very definition of literature as a social construct. Representing this important innovation is *Creative Nonfiction* (CNF), a specialized subject in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMMS) strand, which does away with the traditional demarcations cited earlier, and calls for the exploration of protean genres like oral history, the journalistic essay, and the testimonio/testimonial narrative (Department of Education, 2014), which, despite having existed for years, had not borne the stamp of literary legitimacy. The testimonial narrative, in particular, challenges the traditional, formalist criteria of literature; more significantly, it politicizes education in terms of content and method by foregrounding subaltern experiences. In what follows, I shall discuss the testimonio in as a pedagogical material for the literature classroom, and how it concretizes some of the fundamental principles of critical pedagogy.

Testimonio for Critical Literary Pedagogy

The testimonio or testimonial narrative, to begin with, exemplifies a kind of counterdiscourse foregrounding otherwise ignored memories from marginalized social sectors. Moreover, it primarily revolves around experiences of oppression and disenfranchisement in a language that is direct and without the stylistic furbelows of traditional literature. As such, the testimonio falls short of the established (albeit ideologically tainted) standards of literary aesthetics. Conflating the personal with the public, the testimonio is a narrative of marginality that may be in the form of oral stories, diaries, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts among others (De Guzman, 2008). Like the

autobiography, the testimonio is also a first-person account, but the similarity ends there: whereas the autobiography largely narrates personal accomplishments, the testimonio revolves around instances of injustice, invoking a kind of collective or communal discourse. As such, these “little stories” may well be considered as “counternarratives” that constitute a textual strategy to challenge the abuse of power.

Testimonial narratives—their writing and reading—resonate with Freire’s call for a more critical, transformative, and democratic pedagogy, taking cognizance of the power relations in the educational sphere. Such narratives square with Freire’s efforts towards encouraging students and educators alike to wage a sort of cultural insurgency and try to create radical possibilities for a better world with less oppression and, conceivably, a greater sense of egalitarianism.

Being narratives, testimonios are “outlets and productions of silent histories” (Barrett 1996, para. 12), which, not like much of institutionalized literature that privileges the “author as genius,” illustrate discourses of collectivity and solidarity. Here, the narrator transgresses some of the basic tenets of literary aesthetics in favor of political exigency because the testimonio is primarily an articulation of otherness, a discursive response to the excesses of power. The students’ own stories of subalternity, for that matter, can be rich founts of materials for the critical literature classroom. As Leonard and McLaren (2002) argue, “Such stories need to be voiced, heard, affirmed but also criticized when they embody, often unconsciously, racism, sexism, or antagonisms which oppress others” (p. 72). The testimonio illustrates the dialectic connection between the personal and collective or the cultural: “In this sense, personal narratives move from what some might presume to be an insular engagement of personal reflection, to a complex process that implicates the performative nature of cultural identity” (Alexander 2008, p. 92).

If pedagogy is to be politicized, it behooves the language or literature educator as insurgent intellectual to create opportunities for the sharing of personal stories especially those that deal with varied experiences of oppression. In a country where majority of the population lives in immiserated conditions, where labor rights are flagrantly violated by state and corporate agents, where more than ten percent of its people are working overseas and subjecting themselves to emotional and physical pains, stories of oppression, repression, and exclusion deserve to be retrieved, not so much to be romanticized as to confirm further the excesses of power, As McLaren (1995) notes:

Narrative provides us with a framework that helps us hold our gaze, that brings an economy of movement to the way we survey our surroundings and the way we suture disparate images and readings of the world into a coherent story, one that partakes of continuity; of a fiction of stasis in a world that is always in motion. (p. 92)

Critical pedagogy, after all, is “where both subjugated narratives and new narratives can be written and voiced in the arena of democracy” (McLaren 1995, p. 83). It is committed to “forms of learning and action that are undertaken in solidarity with subordinated and marginalized groups” by way of “self-empowerment and social transformation” (McLaren 1995, p. 32). Kincheloe (2004) also maintains that critical teachers retrieve subjugated and marginalized cultural practices in order to counter the “Eurocentric, patriarchal, and elitist ways of seeing” that have saturated mainstream scholarship (p. 26), and what better way to bring these practices to the fore than to hear or read the first-person accounts of marginalized individuals and groups?

There have been several instances of the use of testimonios in critical education. For example, “Testimonios de Inmigrantes: Students Educating Future

Teachers” by Gonzalez, et al. (2003) revolves around the stories of undocumented migrants, including the painful memories of integration into mainstream American society. These narratives, the authors argue, need to be in the curriculum of aspiring educators some of whom could be migrants themselves who had experienced varied forms of abuse and exploitation that attend migrant life. After all, as Giroux (1996) maintains, subaltern experiences which form part of “a broader responsibility to engage the present as an ethical response to the past” (p. 9) lies at the heart of cultural pedagogy.

The twin issues of migration and identity also appear in “Using Latina/o Critical Race Theory and Racist Nativism to Explore Intersectionality in the Educational Experiences of Undocumented Chicana College Students” by Huber (2010). In light of Latino/Latina Race Theory, the testimonios of Chicana learners were analyzed according to how cultural intuition mediates knowledge construction based on “personal, professional, and academic experiences which shape the ways we understand, interpret, and make sense of our data in the research process” (Huber 2010, p. 84). This goes to show that apart from class, race and ethnicity are inextricably involved in knowledge construction, and should thus be considered in crafting school curricula.

Any testimonio course implicates critical self-reflexivity not only on the part of the students, but also on the part of the teachers as can be gleaned from “A Student-Teacher Testimonio: Reflexivity, Empathy, and Pedagogy” by Carmona and Luciano (2014). The use of the testimonio as a tool of critical pedagogy should necessarily draw from the teacher’s own ideological and experiential repertoire, because it is through self-disclosure that they inspire others to do the same and eventually develop feelings of empathy and solidarity. True to form, the authors discuss in the paper their own experiences and realizations as Latina educators in a private liberal arts college. The testimonio

suggests the value of sharing stories, especially stories of suffering and emotional trauma, in order to gather people into a thinking and sensing community, thus exemplifying the dialectic between the public and the private, the collective and the individual.

Education does not get completed when one earns a degree, but continues beyond formal schooling. This is highlighted in “Educational Testimonio: Critical Pedagogy as Mentorship” by Burciaga and Navarro (2015). Also discussed is the importance of the teacher’s role as mentor who gives encouragement and ensures the development of their ward’s aspirations even after graduating. This lasting mentor-mentee relationship is ascertained through the use of common stories of subalternity, as in the case of the two authors who, despite being women of color, found spaces of empowerment and transformation within the academe. The authors describe two important components of the educational testimonio that bear upon their own lifework as critical educators: first, an “intergenerational” process characterized by a “significant amount of self-disclosure” (p. 39); and second, the demand for discovering, and reflecting on, the experiences that shape one’s life.

The testimonio, as discussed earlier, underscores how the school cannot just be considered as a neutral, apolitical sphere but a site of contestation and empowerment even for society’s most vulnerable sectors. Cervantes-Soon’s (2012) “Testimonios of Life and Learning in the Borderlands: Subaltern Juarez Girls Speak” uses the optics of Chicana feminism in analyzing the narratives of the author’s high school students who were living in a crime-ridden city known for its alarming femicide rate. The two narrators, both teenagers attending a school with a critical pedagogy orientation, disclose how their lives have been heavily affected by patriarchy, corruption, and the excesses of capitalism. In their testimonios, the students reflect on how their identities have been shaped

not only by their lived experience of oppression, but also by their attempts at resisting the status quo. According to Cervantes-Soon, “In a space where women’s bodies are positioned as docile objects,” the school should serve as an insurrectionary sphere in which knowledge should take stock of “everyday life and suffering” (p. 387).

In pedagogical research, testimonial narratives have been employed as a research strategy that accentuates the fluidity of meaning while assuming an unmistakably political position. This is exemplified in “Postcards to Paulo: Enacting Critical Pedagogy in the Action Research Curriculum” by the Action Research Team, University of Cincinnati (2009). As suggested in the title, the study posits the testimonio as a praxis-oriented research tool for re/constructing identity, problematizing the supposed “objectivity” of academic knowledge, and addressing oppression at every turn. The testimonio and other forms of literature that do not suit the traditional template are meant to not only make pedagogy more relevant, but to develop a greater sense of empathy among teachers and students. As a dynamic, dialogic, and emancipatory process, education should after all be about creating “new forms of relationships through realization that ‘being in the world’ is a mutual struggle against oppression” (Du Plessis, Sehume & Martin, 2001, p. 79).

Elsewhere, I have written about my experience in using testimonios as a pedagogical strategy in one of Manila’s night-secondary schools (Moratilla, 2013). My students were generally working-class youth who, because of financial handicap and the need to find jobs early on in life, had chosen an alternative learning set-up. The testimonio did not only serve as a mode of expressing their lived experience of marginality in a country where working-class youth are among the most impoverished and vulnerable sectors; it also articulated, in a language that is both self-reflexive and dialogic, their hopes for

a better, more just society. In light of previous research on the testimonio as a pedagogical strategy, the testimonial narrative can be further deployed not only in the Humanities or Literature subjects of the country's newly minted curriculum, but also in other disciplinal areas where modes of power (including knowledge itself) need to be interrogated and deconstructed.

Concluding Points

More than 40 years since critical pedagogy first became a byword outside Freire's native Brazil, his revolutionary insights on education continue to be as important as they are controversial. It offers a radical alternative to the instrumentalization of learning and teaching as preparation for skilled labor, which unfortunately seems to be gaining ground under the aegis of globalization, with the blurring of those traditional geographical boundaries in the interest of capital. It also shakes off the lethargy of those who despair over the educational system and insist that the solution is nothing short of a radical change. The prospects of waging a violent struggle against capitalism, however, are hamstrung not just by the bourgeoisie's counteroffensive, but also by ideological and strategic rifts within the working class itself. It is imperative, therefore, that other spheres be explored for resisting hegemony and locating contrarian perspectives and practices.

The design of the SHS curriculum has created discursive spaces for attempts at a more democratic pedagogy that could develop political, social, and cultural consciousness among educators and learners alike, and may well serve as the hallmark of a genuine and transformative education. The teaching of literature, for instance, has been made more interesting by the presence of new subjects in SHS which put forward literary forms and practices that have generally only been on the fringe. I illustrated above how the K-12 curriculum, especially new SHS literature subjects like Creative Nonfiction and 21st Century Literature,

can serve as tools for a kind of educational praxis that is critical and empowering.

But the empowering character of these literary forms is not immune to cooptation. One should guard, in this regard, against the ever-unrelenting tendency of bourgeoisie academicians to insert themselves into the discourse of resistance and criticality as an unscrupulous campaign for self-promotion. Creative nonfiction in the Philippines, for example, is being mainstreamed and attached to certain past and present literary “icons,” instead of being attributed to the need for literary inventions and reinventions in response to literature’s perceived elitism. While it is important to trace the evolution of a genre (its provenance in the Philippines, for example, is often associated with a “celebrated” writer who wrote commissioned biographies of business tycoons and politicians), it is more important to point out how it can be reconfigured and reappropriated in such a way as to include other voices, such as those of teachers and students themselves. Literature, in other words, should be snatched away from the hands of the supposed guardians and protectors of the canon—publishers, academicians, litterateurs, writers—who are by large as committed to traditional literature as they are to the status quo.

Therefore, the task at hand, especially on the part of educators, is not only to turn these developments into forms of cultural insurgency, but also to reconfigure them into discursive possibilities of an aggressively liberating and egalitarian public pedagogy.

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Notes

¹ Andres Bonifacio was the acknowledged leader of that revolution, having founded a secret society called Kataas-taasan, Kagalang-galangang Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan” (translated as Supreme, Most Honorable Society of the Children of the Nation). Unfortunately, Bonifacio was accused of promoting factionalism and eventually executed by his fellow revolutionaries.

² The author, Amado V. Hernandez, was a noted poet and labor leader. Critical of the establishment and its seeming overdependence on the US, Hernandez was accused of inciting sedition and imprisoned. He was eventually acquitted and posthumously given a national recognition years later.

³ This 19th century Filipino poet is associated with *Florante at Laura*, his *magnum opus*. The narrative revolves around the relationship between its two main characters—Florante, a soldier, and Laura, daughter of an Albanian king—whose faithfulness and resiliency were tested when a mutineer usurped the throne. The story was later on interpreted as an allegory with anti-colonial undertones.

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