

# Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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*Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*  
vol. 71 no. 1 (2023): 93–105

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# Reading Philippine Science Fiction through Science and Technology Studies The Space Race and Authoritarian Modernity in Gregorio Brillantes's "The Apollo Centennial"

We propose that analyses of Philippine science fiction can meaningfully contribute to the growing intersections between Philippine studies and science and technology studies. We argue that science fiction is not only a literary genre but also a mode of inquiry into our notions of progress and modernity. Through this lens, we examine Gregorio Brillantes's short story "The Apollo Centennial." Set in a future where the Ferdinand E. Marcos regime never ended, "The Apollo Centennial" demonstrates how state infrastructural interventions can discipline Filipino subjects according to the dictates of an authoritarian techno-future. Nevertheless, the short story also gestures to the emancipatory potential of alternative linguistic and sensory modes through which state subjects might imagine other futures that defy narrative sequestration.

**KEYWORDS: PHILIPPINE LITERATURE • SCIENCE FICTION • AUTHORITARIANISM •  
INFRASTRUCTURE • MARCOS REGIME**

In the mid-twentieth century, worldwide media fixated on the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union, two hegemons whose political battles played out not only among the stars but also in the terrestrial proxy wars of Korea and Vietnam. The stakes of this space race were never solely technological; at the height of the Cold War, questions of space exploration were also inevitably questions about the viability of American capitalism and Soviet communism as political and economic systems.

Amid the spectacle of these rival claims to politico-technological modernity, the Philippines was undergoing its own reckoning: Three years after his reelection as president in 1969, Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law. With his imposition of strongman rule, Marcos sought to remake the nation through vast authoritarian projects of repression and modernization. And while Apollo and Sputnik might have seemed far from the lived experiences of Filipinos during martial law, Filipino author Gregorio Brillantes, in his pathbreaking story “The Apollo Centennial,” connected a critique of Marcos’s repressive politics with an indictment of American space exploration as an extension of its imperial projects on Earth. Writing in the register of dystopia, Brillantes’s short story imagines Philippine society in 2069, the hundredth year of a Marcos regime that—in this story—never ended. Yet even in its bleak depiction of a Philippines seemingly frozen in authoritarian time, “The Apollo Centennial” gestures to the persistent vitality of a revolutionary insurgency that dares to imagine those alternate futures which, in Neferti Tadiar’s (2009, 5) words, “fall away” from the preordained telos of capital and the state.

### **Science Fiction as Mode of Inquiry**

Scholars usually trace the roots of science fiction as a literary genre back to the imperial centers of the late nineteenth century, when European and American colonial ambitions were realized on a global scale (Smith 2012, 1). Indeed, the affinities between imperialism and science fiction were manifold, the latter’s utopic imaginings of what was possible in the West often justifying foreign occupation as the advent of “modernity” in backward native societies. Although the popularity of contemporary science fiction is testament to the genre’s continuing resonance, mainstream science fiction often shies away from deep engagement with histories of race and empire, despite the very tropes of the genre being inextricable from them.

Thus, given the imperial provenance of science fiction, why might writers in postcolonial contexts such as the Philippines take an interest in its production? If we consider science fiction only as a literary genre, then its critical reach seems limited by its colonial roots. Yet science fiction, more than a literary genre, can be thought of as a mode of inquiry into the present—a “way of asking and thinking about questions” (Armillas-Tiseyra 2016, 277)—that operates through what Darko Suvin (1979, 4) terms “cognitive estrangement.” As Anna Sanchez (2010, 47) notes in her essay “Waiting for Victory,” the speculative elements of science fiction that occasion estrangement in the reader have “transgressive” potential relevant to the postcolonial experience. By making the familiar seem strange and distant, science fiction can show us how conceptions of newness, progress, and “the future” are, themselves, temporally specific products of history.

“The Apollo Centennial” was written in the wake of the New Critical movement (exemplified by the stories of N. V. M. Gonzalez, Edilberto Tiempo, and Nick Joaquin in the 1950s), which explored not only the dilemmas of writing in English from the periphery of the American empire but also the “chronotopes of the modernity of postcolonial nationhood” (Nadal 2021, 577). Brillantes was also clearly influenced by the aesthetic movement of social realism (exemplified by the 1970s artworks of the Kaisahan collective, a group of visual artists who combined popular forms with political critique), which held a mirror up to the Marcos regime by depicting the “true conditions in . . . society” and imagining alternative “shape[s] of the future” (Flores 2013, 65). But while “The Apollo Centennial” is undeniably a product of its time, it is also certainly science fiction, despite antedating Dean Francis Alfar’s (2005) seminal anthology series, *Philippine Speculative Fiction*, usually considered the origin of Philippine science fiction as a coherent canon, by at least twenty-five years (Elisero 2016, 41–43; Sanchez 2010, 37–38). In its incorporation of defamiliarizing, science-fictional elements—from its motifs of space travel to its dystopian conception of the future—Brillantes’s story is a pathbreaking, idiosyncratic work, an intriguing forerunner to the emergent genre of Philippine science fiction written by a literary figure best known for his incisive explorations of Filipino middle-class life.

Alongside the importance of “The Apollo Centennial” to nascent scholarship on science fiction in Philippine literary studies, we also examine Brillantes’s short story as a case study of how works of science fiction might be

read and analyzed through the lens of science and technology studies (STS). For instance, we highlight how the story engages in infrastructural analysis and critique by speculating about what a century of Marcosian architectural interventions might have looked like and the effects they might have had on state subjects' experiences of time—speculations that reflect back on the Marcos regime's all-too-real engagement in spatial violence justified by the mandates of national progress. More broadly, however, we approach the story as a sociohistorical artifact that creates for its readers a space to not only imagine but also enact, critique, and subvert possible futures. In this regard we hope to demonstrate the value of close readings of science fiction to the disciplinary enterprises of Philippine studies, STS, and their intersections. After all, it is precisely science fiction's "achievement of imaginative distance from the present [that] allows for [the latter's] critical historicization" (Smith 2012, 6), positioning science fiction as a vehicle for postcolonial critiques of the colonial experience.

### **The Future Perfect and Nationalist Modernities**

"The Apollo Centennial" begins with a field trip. Arcadio Nagbuya is chaperoning his sons, Doming and Dolfo, to a yet unspecified destination, waiting with their English-speaking schoolteacher, Mr. Balaoing, for the arrival of a raft. The schoolboys peek at the magazine Mr. Balaoing has in hand, drawn to its glossy pages of "the old spacecraft and the astronauts glinting in the hard sun" (Brillantes 1980, 70). The pages declare in Tagilocan—a fusion of Tagalog, Ilocano, and Kapampangan—that the astronauts depicted are Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, the first men on the moon, and that 100 years have passed since their seminal space mission, Apollo 11 (*ibid.*). Through Arcadio's glances at the magazine, we further learn that it is US-sponsored, an imprint of the United States Information Bureau's Southeast Asian Department (*ibid.*). Yet there are signs, too, of more ominous goings-on, as Arcadio briefly spots two fighter-bombers "hang[ing] gleaming in silhouette" (*ibid.*, 72) above the trip-goers.

In this opening scene alone, Brillantes already draws out the key themes of his story. The Apollo centennial, we learn, is also a Marcos centennial (Pimentel 2019), a speculative future in which the dictator was never ousted. Upon his declaration of martial law, then president Marcos abolished Congress, imprisoned dissidents and political opponents, and granted wide jurisdictional powers to the military in order to extend his political rule

beyond the expiration of his second term (Mijares 2017, 159–64); in “The Apollo Centennial,” Brillantes imagines the Marcos dynasty’s domination of Philippine politics extending much further. As such, Arcadio’s simple journey from the countryside to the city is filled with signs of the regime’s omnipresence, from the widespread use of Tagilogan, which is implied to be a state-mandated lingua franca, to the hauntingly casual appearance of military aircraft above a school bus.

In addition, the manifold entanglements between the Marcos regime and American imperialism are also palpable, from the distribution of magazines by the US Information Bureau to the veneration of American astronauts as bona fide “Filipino” heroes. Historically, the complicity of the US government in the Marcos regime is well-documented, perhaps best exemplified by the increase in military aid and surplus equipment the former channeled to the latter after the declaration of martial law (*ibid.*, 570–75). As a key Southeast Asian site for America’s Cold War strategy of anticommunist containment, the Philippines was also subject to American-backed counterinsurgency initiatives meant to buttress Marcos’s regime against the challenges of communist guerrillas in the north and Islamic separatists in the south (*ibid.*, 575–81). Thus, the continued tenacity of the Marcos regime in “The Apollo Centennial” is intimately tied to the resilience of the American colonial presence, just as Marcos historically received crucial support from US counterintelligence forces (Diaz 2013, 203).

Yet perhaps the most eerie detail about this dystopian future is the atmosphere of celebration that suffuses it. The twinned anniversary of American dominance over outer space and Marcosian dominance over national space is an occasion for excited talk and singing. Writing about the impact of state land reform in Paraguay on the political subjectivity of campesinos, STS scholar Gregg Hetherington (2017, 40) describes how state promises of massive infrastructural change produced “a linear temporality that arranged aspects of the landscape into a natural past and a civilized future,” folding dispossessed campesinos into what he terms “the future perfect—seeing the present of a thing as the future’s necessary past” (*ibid.*, 42). In other words, even as campesinos were being cast aside by the Paraguayan state, they were narratively incorporated into its promises of a modern nation to come.

Similarly, Marcos’s proclamation of martial law in 1972 found its political rationale in his vision of a “New Society,” one that positioned

his autocratic rule as guiding the Filipino masses on a “heroic path” to “entrench[ing] the democratic revolution” (Mijares 2017, 203). Despite the regime’s material effects—that is, concentrating national wealth in the hands of a new oligarchy—its public rhetoric promised a modernist transformation of Philippine society for the benefit of the masses. Thus, state power could be narrated to and experienced by repressed subjects as a genuine source of hope, regardless of the (non)actualization of state promises. In “The Apollo Centennial,” although the Philippines does not appear any closer to a comprehensive space program or moon mission than a hundred years prior, the very promise of techno-futurity, indexed by Armstrong’s and Aldrin’s gleaming space suits, provides communal life with a direction in which expectant aspirations can be cast: Perhaps one day, under the auspices of the Marcos regime, the Philippines can be modern like America.

### **The Dome and Authoritarian Infrastructures**

The trip-goers finally arrive at the heart of Tarlac City, where the schoolchildren’s destination is revealed through a section header in bolded font: **THE DOME**. The Dome, constructed to commemorate the Apollo 11 landing, is an engineering marvel of a museum: a “giant silver egg half-buried in the earth . . . one of similar domes” set up in other major cities around the American empire (Brillantes 1980, 74). As an infrastructural intervention approved by the Marcos regime, the Dome’s physical exterior serves a vital semiotic purpose. Just as the construction of the Vinh City fountain signaled the promise of a “modern and prosperous urban future” for socialist North Vietnam as it entered into “a community of advanced socialist nations” (Schwenkel 2015, 525–27), the spectacular quality of the Dome signals the promise of Philippine inclusion in a scientifically advanced community of nations, with America at the helm.

Indeed, the Dome is a clear allegory for the extravagant architectural interventions of the Marcos regime in the Philippines’s built environment. Massive projects, such as the Folk Arts Theater and the Philippine International Convention Center, constructed in 1974 and 1976, respectively, as part of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) complex, were contemporaneous with Brillantes’s writing of “The Apollo Centennial.” As architecture scholar Gerard Lico (2003) documents in *Edifice Complex*, the CCP is one of the lasting infrastructural legacies of the Marcoses’ conjugal dictatorship, a showcase of the regime’s ability to marshal natural

and human resources for its authoritarian ends. Lico (ibid., 105) pointedly narrates how the CCP buildings, “though varying in outward appearance, share a similar ideological rhizome—they were supposed to foster national pride, to visually convey the power of the autocratic state, and to express the visions of romantic nationalist architecture.” In their deliberate fusion of ostensibly indigenous elements (e.g., features of the *bahay kubo*, the “traditional” Filipino abode) and modernist impulses (e.g., visual lightness and geometric motifs), the CCP buildings are a synecdoche for Marcos’s conception of the New Society—an aspirational “end-state” of a world-class yet uniquely Philippine society that served as rhetorical justification for martial law.

Meanwhile, the exhibits inside the Dome serve their purpose as a strategically arranged archive of the Apollo mission. In “Archive Fever,” poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida (1995, 9–10) suggests that archives are not a neutral place for the commemoration of history but rather a domicile from which an authority can exercise the “hermeneutic right” to interpret the past and suggest a notion of the future consequent to such an interpretation. In *Things Fall Away*, Tadiar (2009, 157) echoes Derrida by describing the Marcosian conception of New Society as an exercise of power over the Filipinos’ experience of time and ability to imagine new futures:

[T]o catch up with the universal time of progress of the advanced capitalist nations and profitably integrate the Philippines into the world economy, the Marcos regime had to tentatively sequester the Philippine polity in a new, ahistorical time. Attempting to isolate it from revolutionary nationalist movements erupting in other third world countries in Asia and Africa, the regime facilitated the fabrication of a . . . depoliticized . . . spatiotemporal order called the New Society.

In “The Apollo Centennial” the Dome serves a similar purpose: to allow the US, as condoned by the Marcos regime, to stake a claim on the visitors’ historical (and thus, “futurical”) sensibilities. The Dome’s exhibits evoke a stultifying sense of nostalgia: “life-size dummies of the three astronauts . . . in their quaint space suits” (Brillantes 1980, 75) are displayed alongside a replica “of the old three-stage Saturn 5 launch vehicle” (ibid., 74). The Dome serves as a literal time capsule, encapsulating visitors in a climate-controlled oasis insulated from the “humid windlessness” (ibid., 69) outside and



the sights and sounds of the guerrilla insurrection not too far away. What Brillantes depicts is a fictional, architectural embodiment of New Society rhetoric: a “spatiotemporal order” that arranges history and place into a site of nostalgic veneration, where what is already past for America is resignified as the Philippines’s future.

Even as the Dome sequesters its visitors in a modernist vision of authoritarian time, its air-conditioned interior can only briefly stave off the material effects of inequity, urban ruination, and state-sponsored violence. As Arcadio and his sons exit the Dome, they stop by the New Washington Cafe on Nevada Street, where he cannot afford to buy the extra *asado mami* (pork noodle soup) one of his children requests, as he has only just enough money for the return trip home (ibid., 77). This immediate experience of economic lack radiates outward into his surroundings, in descriptions characterized by exhaustion and decay: He spots “posters from last year’s elections . . . fading by the door” (ibid., 78), an exhausted waitress numbly working her shift, and a beggar who scatters gathered flies. Trips to the city, we learn, are a hard-earned luxury for Arcadio, who “may have to wait till after the harvest” (ibid., 77) until he can visit again. Indeed, the only signs outside the Dome of the Marcos regime’s promised techno-future are the military weapons used by the state’s counterinsurgency forces. Some distance away from the city center, “helidiscs [hum] in a wide arc” (ibid., 72) over the mountains, and the firefights between guerrillas and soldiers rage on, now with laser rifles instead of metal guns. Indeed, the wonder and techno-optimism broadcasted by the telescreens in the Dome end up heightening the contrast between the promises of American-style space travel and the realities of a Filipino population suffering from both state repression and social abandonment.

In other words the infrastructures used to demonstrate state power to its subjects generate in the latter a multiplicity of sensations and responses—thus, as Brian Larkin (2013, 334) argues, “the political effects of these projects cannot be simply read off from their surfaces.” The gleaming space suits of the Apollo astronauts and sleek, geometric surfaces of the Dome might signal modernist visions of a state-sponsored future, but they might just as easily reveal the gaps between various centers and peripheries whose geographies have been inscribed by empire: the Philippines as peripheral to the US, the province of Tarlac as peripheral to the capital, and the insurgent countryside as peripheral to Tarlac City.

## Old Dialects and Otherworldly Ghosts

In a similar fashion, though, it would be a mistake to read Brillantes's descriptions of economic inequity and material hardship in "The Apollo Centennial" simply as signifiers of poverty and hopelessness. Rather, these descriptions are deliberate aesthetic choices, akin to those of visual artist Cristina de Middel, whose work envisioned "Afronauts"—Zambian space travelers in alternative futures where schoolteacher Edward Nkoloso's attempt to initiate a 1960s space program competing with those of the US and Soviet Union succeeded (Armillas-Tiseyra 2016, 282). In her work, de Middel photographed Black models "dressed in improvised space suits made from bold, 'African' fabrics . . . [set against] ruins and overgrown landscapes" (ibid., 283).

STS scholar Magali Armillas-Tiseyra's (ibid., 285) description of de Middel's photographs might as well be describing the aesthetic of "The Apollo Centennial": one of "untimely and asynchronous . . . technologies [juxtaposed] with ruins and dilapidation." Through its depiction of those unlikely space travelers triumphant in a strange-yet-familiar future, de Middel's work makes a compelling argument for how the material conditions of immiseration can be retooled as windows into other worlds. Within the ruination wrought by the colonial order, the fabulist missions of the Afronauts signify a reaching out for new forms of African political organization that are, in their audacity, otherworldly.

The "world-building" capacities of de Middel's improvised space suits find their parallel in the complex politics of language underpinning "The Apollo Centennial," particularly its conclusion. Throughout most of the story, two linguistic varieties dominate: Tagilocan and English. Tagilocan is the vernacular of the new age: a portmanteau of Tagalog, the culturally predominant language and the language of the political capital Manila; Ilocano, the regional language of the Ilocos provinces, from which Marcos hails; and Kapampangan, a regional language spoken in Brillantes's home province of Tarlac, the story's setting. Whether imposed by legal or cultural force, Tagilocan is Brillantes's imagined eventual authoritarian response to a country that speaks a wide variety of languages: a homogenization of the most "powerful" ones. Yet even in this far future, Tagilocan is clearly inferior to English, the language of empire, the ability to speak the latter still being a "certificate of distinction which all recognize" (Brillantes 1980, 69).

At the close of the story, however, we encounter a different linguistic variety spoken between Arcadio and his cousin Andres, who is revealed to be one of the insurgents—precisely the subjects who, forcibly or otherwise, “fall away” from the state-sponsored vision of a techno-future—fighting in the peripheries of Tarlac. At the river crossing on the way home, under cover of dark, Arcadio speaks with his cousin “not in Tagilogan, but in the old dialect” (ibid., 79)—intelligible, although not explicitly identified, as Kapampangan. Just speaking and hearing the old dialect<sup>1</sup> engages all of Arcadio’s senses: After the relative sterility of the Dome, which is described primarily in visual details as a sanitized enclosure from the city, Arcadio can now hear his cousin’s breathing, smell the “odors of the sun and the rain” (ibid.), and feel a comfort and warmth “that pushes back the enclosing dread” (ibid.) of everyday life.

Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1937) suggested that different literary genres were distinguished not only by their narrative frames but also by the distinct configurations of time and space they discursively represented—configurations he referred to as “chronotopes.” For example, science fiction (as a genre) is identifiable by the use of unfamiliar settings and moments of defamiliarization that serve to comment on and critique the present (Jameson 2005, as cited in Eliserio 2016, 32). Yet apart from their use in distinct literary genres, different chronotopes can also be signified in the same work through different registers of language. In “The Apollo Centennial,” the linguistic varieties of English, Tagilogan, and the old dialect each index distinct chronotopes; that is, each is representative of different configurations of history and empire. The first indexes the culmination of modernity as imperial and specifically American; the second homogenizes the cultural and temporal worlds of the Philippines into a single state-enforced spacetime backed up by the myth of a monolithic nation; and the third is a slippage from imperial and statist imaginings of the future, through its figuration of a longed-for past that remains both tantalizingly realizable and ever so out of reach.

As Derrida (1995, 14) notes, “There is no archive . . . without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.” In other words, every record, arrangement, and interpretation of the past that confers hermeneutic (i.e., meaning-making) power onto its custodians also outlines the negative space of its counter-record—of everything left undocumented, unpreserved, and otherwise excluded from the archive. If the Dome is an imperial English

archive of the past stewarded by the US empire and the Marcos regime, then it has, as its exteriority and counter-archive, the old dialect—spoken in hushed tones in the forests that border Tarlac, where guerrilla forces who stand in for the national democratic insurgency plan out attacks, encirclements, and moments of confrontation and retreat. Similarly, the attempts to subsume the old dialect into the authoritarian modernity of the state by way of Tagilocan are precisely what grant the former staying power—as a “forbidden” orality that cannot be erased, a tongue “unheard for so long yet never quite lost nor forgotten” (Brillantes 1980, 79). In this way the old dialect is the specter that haunts Tagilocan, “the specter . . . which has been thus repressed . . . irreducible by explanation . . . [that still] breathes at the heart of . . . the hallucination, of the hauntedness” (Derrida 1995, 55).

As the ghost of a past that refuses to be exorcised, the old dialect challenges the Dome-archive’s prophecies of a straightforward path toward the techno-future in America’s wake. For after conversing with his cousin in the old dialect, Arcadio’s eye is drawn toward “the moon, now a sharp-pointed sickle in the eastern sky” (Brillantes 1980, 80). With this pointed metaphor, Brillantes situates the political aspirations of Andres and the guerrillas within the communist internationalism envisioned by the national democratic forces against the Marcos regime: the moon as iconographic shorthand for Soviet-style communism (“the sharp-pointed sickle”) juxtaposed with the possibility of alternative locations from which revolution can spring (“the eastern sky”). In contrast to the Dome’s suggestion of a predetermined path to modernity, the old dialect signals instead a future still unknown and undetermined, “an experience which is heterogeneous to all taking note, as to any horizon of waiting” (Derrida 1995, 47).

Although the civil war between the national democrats and state forces in the Philippines is still ongoing, the political aspirations of communist-style proletarian internationalism have been eroded, if not eradicated, by the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union—more than a decade after the initial publication of “The Apollo Centennial.” But Derrida’s notes on the archive, coupled with the Afonautic aesthetics of Cristina de Middel, suggest that ruination is not a place where futures end but rather the province of ghosts—

They were young boys together once: how quickly the years pass . . .  
“Asahan da cayung makiabe kekame,” [I hope you will join us] his  
cousin says . . . and there is the rustle of feet departing across the

sand. "Si Tio daytay tao, Tatang?" [Was that man Uncle, Dad?] asks Doming. Arcadio Nagbuya stares into the dark, in the direction where his cousin has gone, his heart warm and beating rapidly. (Brillantes 1980, 80)

—those haunting rustles in the forests and sands that seem to whisper of other words, of other worlds.

## Note

*The authors would like to thank Lawrence Ypil, for his guidance in bringing this research project to life; Ants Chua, for their comments on an early draft; Ernan Muñoz, for his translation assistance; Miyako Inoue, for her phenomenal graduate seminar on material semiotics whose syllabus we drew on for this article; Jonathan Rosa, for his insights on language, Bakhtin, and chronotopes; Roshan Singh and Shardul Sapkota, for their careful copyediting; the two anonymous Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints referees, our fellow contributors to this special issue, and the guest editors, Paul Michael Atienza and Kathleen Gutierrez, for their invaluable feedback and suggested readings that greatly informed this article.*

*Both authors contributed equally to this article.*

- 1 Although we note that "dialect" is often employed as a pejorative term that falsely implies the inferiority of particular (raced, classed) linguistic practices to those of "languages," we retain its use here to reflect Brillantes's employment of the term in "The Apollo Centennial."

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