

Waiting for Victory

Towards a Philippine Speculative Fiction

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JOSE DALISAY JR. offers the metaphor of the “mirror of Perseus” to clarify how fiction “works like this mirror by letting us see the worst of life, the realities that haunt and terrify us, from a distance, reflected in the lives of imaginary characters caught in situations we can relate to, but which cannot directly harm us, because they are not us” (7). What interests me today is that distance, the extent of indirection. Much attention is given to the “interpretative” aim of stories (Perrine 4), but the “escapist” or cathartic effect tends to be relegated to unimportance by legitimizing institutions, specifically through such contradictory categories as “literary fiction,” meaning mainstream, canonical fiction, and “genre fiction,” meaning popular, commercial, and therefore compromised, fiction. Fiction that sells is almost always suspect of literary merit, and this is why many forms of popular literature find themselves embroiled in a perennial quest for legitimacy.

It is into this arena of oppositions and negotiations that Philippine Speculative Fiction—in English, particularly—makes its entrance.

In 2005, with the publication of the anthology *Philippine Speculative Fiction Volume 1*, Dean Alfar addresses the “value of speculative fiction—not its intrinsic value, because the value of the fantastic is beyond question, but rather why a greater audience has yet to be found.” He then writes what many of us may have already observed: “Realism, of the mode handed down to us by the generations that came before us, is unquestionably dominant”

(vii). One need only to glance at university reading lists and the table of contents of Philippine fiction anthologies to verify that the “unashamedly magical” has had very little space in the local publishing scene. While much Philippine realist fiction may be critiqued as literary fiction, speculative fiction and its sub-genres have always fallen under the genre category, minus—and here is the sad part—the readership. According to Alfar, very few publishing houses will print science fiction and fantasy, although such speculative elements continue to thrive in graphic literature (viii) and, perhaps, on TV and film. In light of this deplorable lack of niche in the print paradigm, Alfar declares to fiction writers:

To find the fantastic, we must create the fantastic. We must write it ourselves, develop it brick by enchanted brick. We must write literature that unabashedly revels in wonder, infused with the culture of our imagination—which means being Filipino and, at the same time, surrendering that very same limiting notion—being more than Filipino, unleashing the Filipino of our imagination, divorcing and embracing the ideas of identity, nationhood and universality. We need to do magic. (viii)

There is something attractive about all this talk about “wonder,” “imagination,” and “magic.” After all, the fantastic are what most of us grew up on: fairy tales, *Arabian Nights*, Disney movies. And then there are the animated series of our youth: *He-Man* and *She-Ra*, *Visionaries*, and so on. So we turn the anthology’s pages but find, to our surprise, that the book showcases “magic realism next to science fiction, imaginary worlds rubbing shoulders with alternate Philippine history, as well as traditional fantasy and attempts at that elusive descriptor, ‘slipstream.’” We read on and find that part of the collection would be one or two stories that contain no elements of “wonder” or “magic” at all, but are told in a non-realist, non-traditional mode, so that we conclude, to our utter amazement and dismay, that we have no idea what speculative fiction is, nor do we understand Alfar’s dismissal of its value as a given.

Questions along those lines are apparently what prompted him, in the second volume released in 2006, to attempt a formal definition. While recognizing the various studies that exist, Alfar puts forward that speculative fiction is essentially “the literature of the fantastic. As an umbrella term,

it covers...fantasy, science fiction and horror, as well as magical realism, surrealism, and stories that fall in between genre boundaries (including the boundary of realism)” (IX). He includes Ellen Datlow’s notion of “speculative sensibilities” and Jed Hartman’s description of “stories that feel like speculative fiction, or that use sf genre conventions and approaches, even though they don’t contain overt speculative elements.” Alfar goes on to provide analogies, supposedly to prove his point:

Speculative fiction is a type of story that deals with observations of the human condition—just like realism—but offers the experience through a different lens...But in the end, it is the story that speaks to us...people and their conflicts, inside and out. The rest, it can be argued, are just cosmetics (or “furniture”, as writer George R.R. Martin writes in *Dreamsong*)—but what wondrous cosmetics! (IX)

Again, this talk about “literature of the fantastic” and “the story that speaks to us” sounds wonderful. Unfortunately, it is also very vague, even for an introductory essay, and therefore problematic.

First, “literature of the fantastic” is a phrase out of Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, which makes distinctions between the uncanny, the pure fantastic, and the marvelous (44). Todorov’s schema classifies science fiction as belonging to the realm of the fantastic marvelous, and rejects stories that do not contain supernatural or extraordinary elements. Therefore, Alfar’s allusion to him, whether intentional or unintentional, leaves much to be explained.

The second problem, Alfar’s argument that “in the end, it is the story that speaks to us...the rest are just cosmetics,” not only presumes that all the stories in the collection are literary to that effect, but also undermines the value of speculative fiction—the value which he does not bother to delineate. Here we see the effects of the struggle for legitimacy: not only do speculative fiction writers create within their ranks various distinctions between “literary” and the “just-plain-bad” speculative story, but they also find their stories subjected to and subsumed by the requirements of the realist tradition. Literature, we have been taught, depicts the human condition; hence, to consider a short story “literature,” we must be able to see ourselves in it—our joys and sorrows and follies—albeit from a distance. I admit to

being a firm believer in this artistic aim. However, if the case is as simple as that, then why make the effort to make magic? What is the value in taking an extra light-year only to view the Earth? Why such distance?

The writer C.N. Manlove laments the devaluing of the speculative element in science fiction: “The very existence of the science fiction creation supposes that our world is only one among many: why should we so obstinately seek to haul it back to our world alone?” (2) The same could be asked of the other sub-genres. Alfar’s “cosmetics” analogy is faulty because it assumes that the speculative element is merely a beautifying factor—unnecessary, really, to the health of the body. On the contrary, the speculative element has very immediate functions; it is, after all, borne of creative impulse, the *how* of meaning, as opposed simply to its *what*. Critics have argued as to whether speculative fiction is a mode or a genre; we refer to it here as genre precisely so we can view some of its conventions, and how these conventions provide the Filipino speculative fiction writer in English opportunities to subvert paradigms in her milieu.

This brings us to a final point in Alfar’s essay: the “Philippine” aspect in the title *Philippine Speculative Fiction*. Literary categorization and the print paradigm are not the only enemies of the genre, after all; there is also the pervasive view that the unreal elements of speculative fiction have no place in the turmoil of local socio-political realities. As a result, “Philippine speculative fiction” appears as an oxymoron. Later we will analyze a sample story from the most recent anthology and observe the implications of the genre on the “Filipino imagination,” particularly an imagination written in English.

In the science fiction and fantasy community, two major arguments comprise the opposition to the name “speculative fiction”: first, it is a redundancy, since all fiction is speculative anyway (Knight 3), and second, its use may neglect important, unique characteristics within each sub-genre. Horror, for example, relies more on atmosphere than the fantastic, strange or unreal (Hartwell 4), and therefore not all horror stories are speculative. More problematic has been the case of science fiction and fantasy, the two largest categories under the speculative genre. “Speculative fiction” originates in science fiction, with Robert Heinlein virtually patenting the term in a 1948 essay. However, speculative fiction took on new dimensions as science fiction developed as a genre. Edward James refers to Brian Aldiss’ *Trillion*

Year Spree and other such analyses in *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, where he traces the historical evolution of science fiction from the Gothic romance (Mary Shelley), to utopian views of technology (Jules Verne), to variations on hard and social sciences (Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein), to various worlds of dystopia (George Orwell, and later New Wave writers like Judith Merrill and Harlan Ellison), to cyberpunk (Bruce Sterling, William Gibson), to overlapping with myth and fantasy (Franz Kafka, Poul Anderson). Science fiction and fantasy are traditionally considered opposites in objective and content: while science fiction locates itself in the future or near-future, hinges on a scientific, rational fact or invention, and tends to advocate change, fantasy revisits the past, introduces non-rational supernatural factors like enchantment or ghosts, and focuses on the restoration of a mythic order. Science fiction writer Brian Aldiss clarifies the difference further by explaining how “fantasy in a narrower sense, as opposed to science fiction, generally implies a fiction leaning more towards myth or the mythopoeic than towards an assumed realism,” but also distinguishes the mutual relationship between the two groups: “science assimilates fantasy,” but “fantasy is almost as avid in assimilating science,” because “in its wider sense, fantasy clearly embraces all science fiction” (26).

In the contemporary search for new forms of expression, science fiction and fantasy writers have transgressed modes and genre boundaries, so “speculative fiction” becomes useful not just as a publishing category but also as an indication of commonalities among apparently distinct story types. The writer Orson Scott Card describes “all stories that take place in a setting contrary to known reality” as speculative fiction, namely those that take place in the future (What if Mikey Arroyo became president of the Philippines thirty years from now?), in an alternate world (What if Andres Bonifacio’s party had won in the Malolos elections?), in other worlds (Life on terraformed Mars, for example), pre-history (Ancient civilizations that disappeared at the height of their glory), and in a world, here or other, where some law of nature is ignored or subverted (A man wakes up to find that he has grown seraph’s wings—as in Eric Gamalinda’s *Planet Waves*). Card also emphasizes throughout his book a primary similarity between science fiction and fantasy, which turns this point into a characteristic of speculative fiction: science and magic, to be maximized in fiction, must work according to established limitations.

Todorov's study of 19th century narratives is a seminal work in the analyses of speculative texts. A story enters the realm of the fantastic if when fulfills three conditions: first, the reader hesitates between scientific and supernatural explanations for the strange event/s; second, a character may share in the reader's hesitation; and third, the reader does not view the events as poetic or allegorical, as she would view the fable, for example (33). The element of hesitation and the anti-poetry/allegory stance are what truly define the genre. In most speculative fiction, the reader's hesitation is brought about by an "unreal" element—*novum* in science fiction, meaning 'novelty,' 'innovation,' or 'absent paradigm,' i.e. time machine, colonized planets, etc. (Suvin 67). Hesitation is also induced or developed through the technique of estrangement or defamiliarization, whereby the reader is initiated into the text through "codes" instead of expositions or info-dumps. Part of this strategy is "worlding," which concerns itself with the building of an imaginary community, society, world, etc. until it attains a sense of verisimilitude not unlike that of a realist text. The establishment of rules, whether for magic or science, contributes much to the sense of reality which the reader ironically gains from an unreal world (Card 45). And then there is the mega-text, which, in Catherine Brooks-Rose's *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, means "parallel story," as in the case of the complex universe of *Lord of the Rings* (243). Damien Broderick expands this concept to the level of intertextuality, by defining the mega-text as a build-up of icons or images that comprise a common paradigm from which writers may draw without having to resort to exposition (59).

The mega-text plays an important part in our discussion of Philippine speculative fiction, which we will arrive at after analyzing Todorov's anti-allegory stance in reading speculative fiction. If we approach a work believing that the event is merely symbolic, then the unreal element loses its potency. Talking animals, for example, would cause us immense hesitation any given day; talking animals in a narrative which we recognize as a fable will not. The speculative element has specific literary and social functions. In the work itself, the speculative element—whether *novum* or the supernatural—must play a role in the development of the narrative itself by intervening; it cannot be a mere bystander, especially not mere cosmetics. In the work's social milieu, the speculative element—again, whether *novum* or the supernatural—serves as a shield against censorship and becomes a means

of transgressing taboos (159). Through vampire characters, for example, the subject of necrophilia is explored, just as an Orwellian future, through its narrative, may justify the need for anarchy.

That the speculative element becomes an agency for literary and social transgressions gives us reason to consider this mainly Anglo-American genre as a means of re-imagining the Filipino experience. For years we have heard that fantasy and science fiction provide only escapism (Macaraig 30); that Filipinos are not ready for the speculative genre; that there would be no market for this type of writing. Baryon Posadas cites similar observations in an article on Philippine science fiction published in 2001. Posadas relates how, in opening a new category in 2000, the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards seemed to have deliberately chosen the name “future fiction” over the better known but much stigmatized “science fiction.” There seems to be an emerging acknowledgment of the genre by literary institutions, and yet a tradition of Philippine science fiction remains scarce (23). The good news is that major Filipino writers in English have appropriated the speculative mode every now and then: magic realism in the works of Nick Joaquin, Alfred Yuson, Rosario Cruz Lucero, and Charlson Ong; future fiction by Gregorio Brillantes; fairy-tale elements in the stories of Gilda Cordero-Fernando and Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo; and the list may go on. And yet critical studies of such works tend to dismiss the unreal elements as distractions, “mere cuteness” even (qtd in Hidalgo 61), in favor of depth, which such critics may understand if only they pay more attention to the very presence of these elements.

Is speculative fiction becoming a legitimate genre? Posadas suspected so in 2001, but he might be saddened, like us, to hear rumors that the Palancas’ “future fiction” category may be abolished this year. This possibility leaves us wondering, “Why abolish it now?” especially since the past couple of years have been good to the speculative genre, if publications are evidence of this. Adding to the speculative fiction published occasionally in literary periodicals, at least four anthologies in the genre have been released since 2005: the two *Philippine Speculative Fiction* anthologies, edited by Dean Alfar, UP Press’ *Nine Supernatural Stories*, edited by April Yap and Lara Saguisag, and Psicom’s *Pinoy Amazing Adventures*, edited by Carljoe Javier. One observation we can make regarding these books is the not-so-subtle presence of the literary institutions: these editors and a good number of their writers

have in fact been participants of writing workshops. Even *Pinoy Amazing Adventures*, which title is, in fact, a deliberate allusion to the early American sci-fi and fantasy magazines, while published by the same commercial company that produces “masa”-directed books on diverse topics like ghosts, texting, love quotes, etc., is the result of a collaboration among five university-educated writers.

What does this tell us about speculative fiction in the Philippines? Three things, perhaps: one, that those who want to write and publish in the speculative genre are relatively young writers; two, that some of these young writers, by virtue of their acquaintance with legitimizing institutions such as the academe and the publishing industry, have succeeded to somehow legitimize these publications; and three, that speculative fiction in the Philippines differs much from that in the United States, for example, where fandom plays a huge part in the publishing world. The existence of fans, after all, would have subverted the print paradigm in the country (Gonzales), and indeed some of them have, if we consider the growing community of on-line bloggers, for example, many of whom are not just readers of fiction in English, but readers of speculative fiction as well. In fact, if we consider the social implications of technology-driven developments in the past five years, that is, blogging, which led to closely knit virtual communities; piracy, which led to better accessibility to many Japanese anime and American live action series; C.G.I. and the popularity of “telefantasyas” (Flores), we can begin to see that there just might be an audience for the speculative genre after all.

Of course, all this exposure to technology and Western cultural artifacts may cause more complex problems than that of readership. The main problem that Posadas observes in the sci-fi novels published in the late 1990s is that the authors used Western tropes for their novums—nuclear war paranoia and fertility problems, for example, are historically alien experiences to our Third World context. The result, according to Posadas, is poor imitation, which may account for the poor readership as well. After all, true fans of the genre are already well-acquainted with the clichés; if local speculative fiction offers no new novum or supernatural element to rival those of Anglo-American speculative fiction, then indeed, why settle for imitation?

Here we return to Dean Alfar’s *Philippine Speculative Fiction*, which is an object of great interest precisely because of its appropriation of a

predominantly Anglo-American genre. Volume One was a finalist in the 2006 Manila Critics' Circle National Book Award for Best Anthology. It also received much recognition, particularly from the editors of the American publication, *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror Nineteenth Annual Collection*, who gave citations to Nikki Alfár's "Ember Wild," Francezca Kwe's "Lovelore" and Vincent Michael Simbulan's "Into the Arms of Beishu." While we may criticize the anthology's propensity for seeking such recognition, we may also note how these particular stories not only tackle themes of freedom, love and home, but do so using imagery and icons that, in their preoccupation with Filipino history and conflict, have little or no resemblance to the Western mega-text.

Stories that aim to parody the genre conventions, such as Carljoe Javier's "The Day the Sexbomb Dancers Came," and the adventures of Emil Flores' Arturo Ganigan, NBI (Yap 25 and Javier 64), must inevitably appropriate Western icons in order to poke fun at contexts or the genre itself. Stories that are in earnest, however, must find other icons. As Posadas has already observed, the only way for Philippine speculative fiction to resist the folly of mere mimicry is to accumulate a counter mega-text.

One icon that is beginning to surface as part of a possible Philippine mega-text is water. If we consider the stories in the latest Alfár anthology, we would find the recurrence of a water image in many of the stories. Nikki Alfár's "Bearing Fruit," for example, retells a folktale where the virgin protagonist is impregnated by a virile mango that floats down the river in which she is bathing. Yvette Tan's future fiction "The Child Abandoned" is set in the squatters' area along the Pasig River, which becomes subject to The Great Change. Joshua So's "Feasting" features a village whose inhabitants have never before tasted meat eking out a living by the sea. Other recurring imagery include fantastic creatures like the *duwende* and indigenous dragons, and of course historical icons such as the Spanish friars and Jose Rizal. We see now how the icon and the mega-text approximate mythic proportions—it becomes a collective memory, which, in turn, informs the writing of others who belong to the same mega-text.

It may be through the mingling of the past, mythic, geographical and historical, with present and future concerns on identity and the individual's place in the context of conflict that the fate of Philippine speculative fiction

lies. In such texts, then, it becomes important to be conscious of the struggle of differences that exist not just on the level of nation but on those of class and gender as well. In a text that allows a writer to “transgress the Law” (Todorov 166), the Law must definitely be subverted. Mary Talbot, in *Fictions at Work: Language and Social Practice in Fiction*, points out, among other feminist science fiction, Pamela Zoline’s short story “The Heat Death of the Universe,” which, “like a lot of New Wave writing...deals with entropy; uniquely, it also deals with *housework*” (171). Here, even the juxtaposition of everyday female experience with male science becomes a subversion. Such oppositional discourses must exist in a speculative story in order to fulfill the genre’s potential; if they are ignored, as unfortunately many Filipino speculative fiction writers still do, then the story loses much of its potency.

For instance, the malleability of gender so effectively problematized in Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Brian Aldiss’ “Becoming the Full Butterfly” seems to be depicted in Vincent Michael Simbulan’s “What You See Is Not What You Get” (Alfar 136), but closer inspection leads us to believe that by transferring the soul of the homosexual man into the body of a woman, the story restores the Law of heterosexuality instead of transgressing it. One may argue, of course, that the story is a light fantasy intended to be humorous; nevertheless, humor has sacrificed what was perhaps the most significant aspect of the story. Joshua So’s “Feasting” in the same anthology would have been a poignant depiction of Filipino diaspora, with the head of the family leaving his village in order to send meat home to his family, if not, again, for the story’s perpetuation of female dichotomy, where woman is either weak or demonic, i.e. the man’s mother an image of waiting, the man’s wife the epitome of extravagance.

Such missed opportunities, brought about by disregarding the nature of the genre as transgressive, sacrifice a story’s potency. As a final illustration, I would like to examine the short story “Waiting for Victory” (Alfar 9-21). This story by Michael Co places two soldiers, a man and a woman, in a time machine. Their mission is to assassinate the eighteen survivors of the ship *Victoria* in 1521. Because of some scientists’ miscalculation, the soldiers were sent a few days earlier than expected, which resulted in the soldiers’ abandoning their mission after so much waiting. The story ends thus:

Things get repetitiously tedious and tediously repetitious from that point on in very much the same way the human story tends to repeat itself not in clean cycles but in convoluted knots of well-meant plans, disastrous failures, and sincere ignorance, all the while bobbing in an ocean of impudence and inevitability. So their story ends here, in 1521.

They waited for as long as they could. Victoria never came to meet them. (Alfar 21)

What we see in this story is the merging of a foreign icon—the time machine—and a Philippine icon—the historic landing of Magellan’s fleet. While the story brings up the relevant theme of “missed opportunities” and not making “the right changes,” it also suffers from its misuse of icons. First, the conventional problems that come hand in hand with time travel, such as causality and especially the Butterfly Effect, are more ignored than refuted. Fatima, the woman soldier, insists that the Butterfly Effect isn’t an absolute truth: “Many changes, big changes, are needed to make a difference” (15). However, the informed reader remains unconvinced by this argument, mainly because the reader never learns what informs this mindset of Fatima.

Second, the reader is inclined to ask two questions of the use of historical allusion. First, if we were to remove the dates and change the name of the places, would the story still be Filipino? And second, what is the significance of the time machine’s being Chinese-made, when the Chinese-Hispanic-Filipino dynamics and other issues of colonization are brought to light only in the expository rambling of a bungling scientist? Again, the story seems to aim for ironic humor, and yet the vagueness of the irony lessens what would have been quite an impact. That the story presents no answer, or rather, presents the answer in the form of an exposition delivered by a narrator who suddenly reveals his omniscience in the end, provides us with the unfortunate reading that the story itself is an example of a missed opportunity.

The elements in speculative fiction make the genre—or mode, as some critics would insist—transgressive. Knowledge of these elements—the novum, the fantastic, the icon, the mega-text—equips us with the ability to harness this transgressive potential into something fully relevant to the Filipino experience, whether in matters of nation, class, or gender.

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