

## Darna as Canonical Counter-Discourse on Power in the Superhero Genre

Cherish Aileen Aguilar Brillon

University of the Philippines Diliman

### ABSTRACT

Power is an important iconography in the superhero genre. In this regard, one of the most recognizable iconographies in Darna is the *bato* (stone). However, the nature of Darna's powers and the constitution of the stone are rarely discussed when talking about her even if these are important elements in her overall mythology. To address this, the paper explores the materiality of Darna's powers, specifically the origin and constitution of the stone, and situates it within a Filipino belief system and folk culture. Specifically, it traces the roots of Darna's powers in *agimat* or *anting-anting* (amulets or talismans), *sapi* (spirit possession), and *loob* (pure heart) as these are elements that give her a distinct Filipino identity. This articulation of Darna's power is based on the idea of canonical counter-discourse where assumptions about canon texts in fiction are subverted for post-colonial purposes. In discussing Darna's power, this paper not only affirms the Filipino folk culture origins of Darna, but also subverts the idea of power in the Western superhero genre which remains very male-centric, continues to be associated with masculine expressions of power, and privileges the individual over the collective.

*Keywords:* counter-discourse, Darna, folk culture, power, superhero genre

The popularity of comic book movies (CBM), particularly superheroes, in contemporary times makes it an ideal platform to talk about various issues happening in society. As power is considered an integral convention that distinguishes the superhero from other genres such as action, adventure, and fantasy (Coogan 3), it is important to analyze its representations since it can provide an understanding of how people in a particular society interpret its use. According to Jesse Walker, superhero stories can invoke important issues about society, including the fantasies and ambivalence about and around power ("The Politics"). Curiously, despite being one of the most important signifiers of the genre, the nature and constitution of power and what it means is still glossed over in superhero studies.

According to Nestor Castro, people with extraordinary powers are not new to Filipinos because they can be found in the earliest epics (qtd. in Brillon *Manufacturing* 181).

In the Philippines, Darna, created by Mars Ravelo and illustrated by Nestor Redondo, is considered the oldest and most popular superhero. She initially appeared as Varga in *Bulaklak Magazine* in 1947 before being relaunched as Darna in the May 13, 1950 issue of *Pilipino Komiks*. She is one of the few Filipino icons whose appeal transcends generations and whose success goes beyond print into cinema, television, and theater. This makes her a favorite topic of interest inside and outside academe.

Darna's *bato* (stone), the source of her power, is easily one of her most recognizable iconographies, so much so that the line, "*Ding, ang bato!*" (Ding, the stone!), uttered and popularized by local actress Vilma Santos, has become a familiar line in Filipino popular culture. However, the nature of Darna's powers and the constitution of the stone are rarely discussed when talking about her even if these are important elements in her overall mythology. In particular, the roots of Darna's powers in Filipino folklore and culture, specifically in *agimat* (amulets), *sapi* (spirit possession), and *loob* (loosely translated in this paper as "pure heart"), have not been given enough focus even if these are the elements that give her a distinct Filipino identity; this is despite the constant comparison to and dismissal of Darna as a copycat of Western superheroes.

To address this, the paper explores the materiality of Darna's powers, specifically the origin and constitution of the stone, situating it within a Filipino belief system and folk culture. Darna's stone is an important narrative device in movie and television adaptations because it represents her weakness, especially when the stone gets lost or falls into the wrong hands. How can we explain the nature of her powers and Darna's transformation into Darna using Filipino concepts? To answer this, I conducted a close reading of available Darna texts, including four Darna *komiks* released between 1950 to 2003,<sup>1</sup> three movies,<sup>2</sup> and selected episodes of the 2005 television series.<sup>3</sup> The analysis centers on the evolution of her powers, how the stone was introduced and its function in the story, and how it compares to how power is constituted in the Western superhero genre. Interview anecdotes from Rex Ravelo, son of Mars Ravelo, and Danilo Jurado who played Ding in two Darna movies<sup>4</sup> were also included as supplementary data.

This articulation of Darna's power vis-à-vis how it contributes to the expansion of the iconography of the Western-dominated superhero genre is based on the idea of canonical counter-discourse. According to Helen Tiffin, part of the task of postcolonial scholars is not just to re-read, but also to rewrite literary works. To this end, postcolonial literature functions as "counter discursive strategies to the dominant discourse with the view of exposing and eroding those of the dominant discourse" (96).

This is where canonical counter-discourse comes in as the “post-colonial writer takes up characters or the basic assumptions of a canon text and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes” (97). While Tiffin is mostly talking about novels, I am adapting the idea of canonical counter-discourse to talk about how Darna’s power as part of the superhero iconography subverts the articulation of power in the Western superhero genre—which in this paper is considered canon when it comes to superhero texts as asserted by Carrielynn Reinhard and Christopher Olson:

Superhero films produced around the world appear to replicate the superhero genre as it emerged out of the comic books originally produced in the United States. Various media translate the superhero character and story without significantly altering the fundamental, defining aspects of either. (13)

Further, there is the factor of multiplicity of authors, since aside from Darna’s original creator Mars Ravelo, there were other komiks illustrators, producers, directors, and writers of Darna adaptations. While they were all influenced by the Western superhero genre, they also contributed to and engaged in the practice of creating counter-discourse as seen in the modifications they made to Darna’s mythology and narrative.

This study hopes to contribute to existing superhero literature, specifically in the reinterpretation of its various iconographies from a local perspective in a way that also aims to decolonize Darna not only from the still prevailing assumption (and sometimes dismissal) that she is largely an imitation of Wonder Woman and other Western superheroes. This is with the hope of fostering a postcolonial and gendered understanding of power in the superhero genre. This paper also responds to Castro’s previous remarks that there is a need to further explore, analyze, and challenge the commonly held assumption that the power of local superheroes always comes in the form of outside interference, which reflects the Filipinos’ tendency to look for outward interventions (qtd. in Brillon *Manufacturing* 182).

The paper starts with a discussion of how power is generally seen and studied in the superhero genre. This is followed by a brief overview of Filipino folk culture and belief system centered around agimat, sapi, and loob, and then a description of the evolution of Darna’s powers in the narrative. Lastly, the paper discusses how the Filipino belief system incorporated in Darna texts serves as a counter-discourse to the prevailing articulations and notions of power in the superhero genre and how this contributes to the decolonization of Darna.

## Power in the Superhero Genre

According to Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith, the Western superhero genre was derived from adventure-narrative figures that appeared in early novels or pulp magazines (222-23). Superman and Batman became the earliest superheroes associated with the genre as we know it today.

Peter Coogan lists three distinguishing conventions of the superhero genre that set it apart from other genres: mission, power, and identity. Mission means superheroes will always fight for justice and be on the side of the law. In this regard, superhero stories are preoccupied with themes of power, salvation, triumph of the underdog, and the attainment of justice (3). As the genre initially started out as children's fare, superheroes must embody positive characteristics and promote positive values that society deems acceptable, including how to use power responsibly. As one of the most important iconographies of the superhero genre, power pertains to the skills and capabilities of the superhero that are far superior to those of ordinary humans (4). Lastly, the genre is defined by the secret identity trope which is also tied to how costume and powers operate. For example, some superhero names relate to their powers (as in superhuman strength for Superman), some to their attributes (Batman as a creature of the night), and for some, how their costume functions as an externalization of their identity (Captain America's brand of US heroism) (Duncan and Smith 227). In this regard, it is important that the superheroes' human secret identities are set in stark contrast with their superhuman persona so that they are easily relatable to their audiences (228).

Superhero scholars have commonly identified extraordinary power and how it is used in stories as an important marker of the genre. Richard Reynolds describes these heroes as man-gods, whose powers are similar to the demigods found in Greek literature (12-13). However, Alex Romagnoli and Gian Pagnucci note that these powers must be balanced out by a certain weakness (kryptonite for Superman). Lastly, since the genre deals with the fantastic, powerful, and extraordinary, the mortal alter-ego is an important element as it humanizes the superheroes and makes them "relatable" to readers and audiences (8).

In local literature, Emil Flores initially explored the idea of a Filipino superhero genre following the typology set by Reynolds, which includes a brief description of the powers of Darna, Lastikman, and Captain Barbell (29). However, he did not explain in detail the nature and constitution of these powers nor connect it to a Filipino belief system, although he asserts that the local version of the genre is also indigenized.

While there has been no generalized term in superhero literature for how powers are categorized or labeled, I have grouped them into three based on my observations as a long-time fan of the genre. These are: *innate*, *acquired*, and as a *product of wealth and resources*.

Superhero powers can be considered *innate* if they are born with it as in the case of Superman, Wonder Woman, and the X-Men. In this sense, there is no mortal alter-ego because they are the same superpowered individuals in costume. On the other hand, power is *acquired* if it is given to them as in the case of Alan Scott (and later on Hal Jordan) who transforms into Green Lantern because he is given a green lantern and a ring (in the Hal Jordan version); or through a scientific mishap in the case of Peter Parker when he becomes Spiderman after he is bitten by a radioactive spider. Here, the alter-ego is really a mortal being who is initially without extraordinary abilities. Lastly, there are some characters like Batman and Iron Man who do not have “powers” per se but are able to invent gadgets and weapons for their use since they have *access to unlimited wealth and technological resources*. Unlike the first category where the costume does nothing because the superhero and the alter ego are the same, here the alter-ego remains a mortal being with their costume literally becoming their powers.

These categories are very important in order to understand the distinctiveness of Darna’s powers and to appreciate how cleverly Mars Ravelo and succeeding authors were able to incorporate elements from the Filipino belief system.

## **An Overview of Agimat, Sapi, and Loob**

Foremost folklorist Isabelo delos Reyes recognizes the importance of folklore, customs, myths, and traditions as they are the:

. . . elements constitutive of the genius, the knowledge and languages of Filipinos . . . [the] indispensable materials for the understanding and scientific reconstruction of Filipino history and culture. (qtd. in Mojares)

In this regard, there are three aspects taken from the Filipino belief system that Darna mostly utilizes in its narratives from komiks to movie and television adaptations. These are agimat, sapi, and loob. An overview of how Filipino scholars have studied these concepts and their functions in Filipino society is integral to this paper as it provides context on how Ravelo and other authors incorporated them in the stories.

Anting-anting is deeply embedded in Filipino culture as traditional epics reference heroes as possessing them, thus giving the latter extraordinary powers and

capabilities to help others (Mabanglo xvii). It comes from the Malay root word *anting* or pendant—something that is meant to be worn like a necklace. Filipinos use anting-anting and agimat interchangeably, although in some cases it is also known as *bertud* or *galing* (Lubang 36). For Michael Tan, however, agimat is a form of anting-anting with a specific function—that of protecting the user and giving them powers (“Anting-anting”). He also points out a minor distinction when talking about the English translations of anting-anting. For example, amulets are objects that protect a person from danger, whereas a talisman is specifically meant for good luck (“Anting-anting”).

In this paper, anting-anting is a general term for how power in Filipino folk culture is materialized and made tangible. It also has various types and forms. The most common is in the form of a medallion—a pendant with engraving and worn as a necklace that is recharged by reciting an *orasyon* (prayers). The *orasyon*, which is found in a small book called *libreto*, is an anting-anting in itself since the owner can recite these prayers as needed. As mentioned, agimat as a type of anting-anting comes in the form of objects found in nature such as stone and dried fruit, while a *mutya* (charm) can be found in trees or animals. There is also *subo*, an anting that is either tattooed on the body of the person or an essence that resides within the person (Lubang 37; Pambid 19).

In their discussions, Reynaldo Ileto and Nenita Pambid explain that regardless of the kind, the anting-anting must be recharged and energized with an *orasyon*, especially during Holy Week, to retain its potency (Ileto 29; Pambid 15-16). Further, it should always remain under the care of the owner, taking extra precautions not to reveal its existence. Most importantly, it is not to be touched by other people since its efficacy is diminished (Arens 40). Lastly, while it is generally known that anting-anting, especially in the form of agimat, are buried with their owners upon their death, *subo* is something that can be passed on to the holder’s heir or to the person they have chosen to possess their anting. The *subo* comes in the form of a tiny bead of mucous or saliva that the dying person spits out to the hand of the receiver which they need to immediately swallow (Lubang 37; Pambid 19). Anting-anting is also always associated with goodness, purity of heart, perfection, healing, and mastery (Pambid 20).

There are different perspectives on the function of anting-anting in Filipino culture. According to Richard Arens, the use of anting-anting and agimat comes from a desire to control the environment and master the force of nature while also revealing the wishes, hopes, desires, and expectations of traditional Filipinos (38). Anting-anting also belongs to a “greater configuration of beliefs which established a primitive

security system in early Philippine society” (41). Put simply, anting-anting gives its owners a feeling of security, prosperity, and control by protecting them from human or supernatural enemy, providing them with good fortune, good health, and even romantic partners (Arens 41-42; Lubang 3).

Belief in anting-anting became an important element in the fight against colonial powers, and the struggle for justice and freedom of ordinary Filipinos (Pambid 15). While most contemporary Filipinos tend to dismiss amulets and talismans as part of folk culture and urban legends, Filipino scholars see these as reflective of the Filipino psyche and psychology and are ultimately tied to questions of leadership (15). Mars Ravelo, who hails from Cavite, a town steep in agimat stories, is familiar with these folk knowledge or practices and, as we shall see in the discussion, his early Darna stories reflect his familiarity with these supernatural and extraordinary stories.

Understanding *sapi* or spirit possession is key to appreciating how Darna subverts the conventions of the superhero genre as it illustrates the complex interplay of power, costume, and identity.

*Sapi* is an important part of the local belief system. Prospero Covar’s description of the body as a container or vessel for the *kaluluwa* (spirit) is an apt description for Narda and Darna’s transformation. Zeus Salazar pointed out that the *kaluluwa* can even temporarily leave or enter a body, which means that they are fluid “entities” (qtd. in Covar 13). This phenomenon is known as *sapi*.

Jaime Bulatao explains that *sapi* occurs when the spirit is believed to enter a person and takes control of their actions and words. While in a trance-like state, the possessed person may speak in a totally different voice, and may say and do things against their will. When the person returns to normal consciousness, they cannot remember anything that happened during the trance. They do not have any control over the time or place of possession, and in the case of good spirits, there is even a schedule of days and hours for their coming or going (415). Fenella Cannell, in her study of Bicolano traditional healing modalities, describes how faith healers use amulets to commune with the spirits. Her description of *saro* (spirit companion) is similar to the idea of spirit possession, where healers experience a period of losing consciousness and they appear to die for three days. The healers’ experience is thus associated with Christ’s passage from death to resurrection. During this time, the healer who is possessed by *saro* will announce herself by recruiting patients and curing a significant number of people. When the healer regains her own personhood, she will remember nothing (89). Both studies of Bulatao and Cannell point to an interesting insight about *sapi*—that majority of those possessed are women.<sup>5</sup>

Sapi is mostly thought of as a negative experience, influenced in part by representations in movies and television, where the possessing agent is usually portrayed as a bad or evil spirit. But as seen in the aforementioned studies, a person can also be possessed by varied agents such as saints or angels (characterized as good spirits), neutral ones like spirits of the dead such as close family members or relatives, and even nature spirits like *lamang-lupa* (gnomes or underground creatures) or *duende* (dwarf) (Bulatao 416).

Lastly, *loob*—translated as one’s internal self, but in later discussions will mean noble or pure heart—according to Virgilio Enriquez, is part of the duality (*loob* and *labas*) present in the Filipino psyche. To illustrate this relationship, *loob* is in conjunction with *labas* (external self) such that a person’s outer beauty is reflective of the kind of *loob* that they have. In Filipino culture, to have *mabuting kalooban* (pure heart), one must have no ulterior motive except that of kindness and inherent graciousness (444). Interestingly, according to Covar, *kaluluwa* is also tied to *loob* because *kaluluwa* is located within that duality—it can be seen as *dalisay* (pure) or *maitim* (dark), *matuwid* (good) or *halang* (evil) (13).

Further, Katrin De Guia’s definition of *loob* also connects it to *lakas ng loob* which means inner strength and *tatag ng kalooban* which means endurance of spirit. *Loob* is what inspires a person to transcend limitations such as pain, fear, distance, and ignorance (463). In Darna texts, the condition of the *loob* is an essential requirement to become a superhero. For one to be christened a hero in Filipino society, one needs to have physical and moral strength, fortitude, and unconditional love—in short, *mabuting kalooban*.

*Loob* is what imbues the local superhero genre with a more moral and spiritual component that is not present in Western superhero texts. This is why Filipinos rarely have local superhero characters who are considered anti-heroes.

## **Darna’s Powers**

In the superhero genre, power is what makes the “super” in the hero and, in a way, makes them modern day gods and goddesses.

In whatever version of the story, Narda’s power has always been from an outside source (religious or alien). This power is contained in a stone with the word “Darna” engraved on it. Using Mars Ravelo’s origin story as basis, Narda’s power is *acquired* because it was given to her (or she chanced upon it in the original komiks story), but it is also *innate* because when she swallows the stone, it becomes a part of her essence, similar to what happens when one has or becomes the recipient of *subo*.

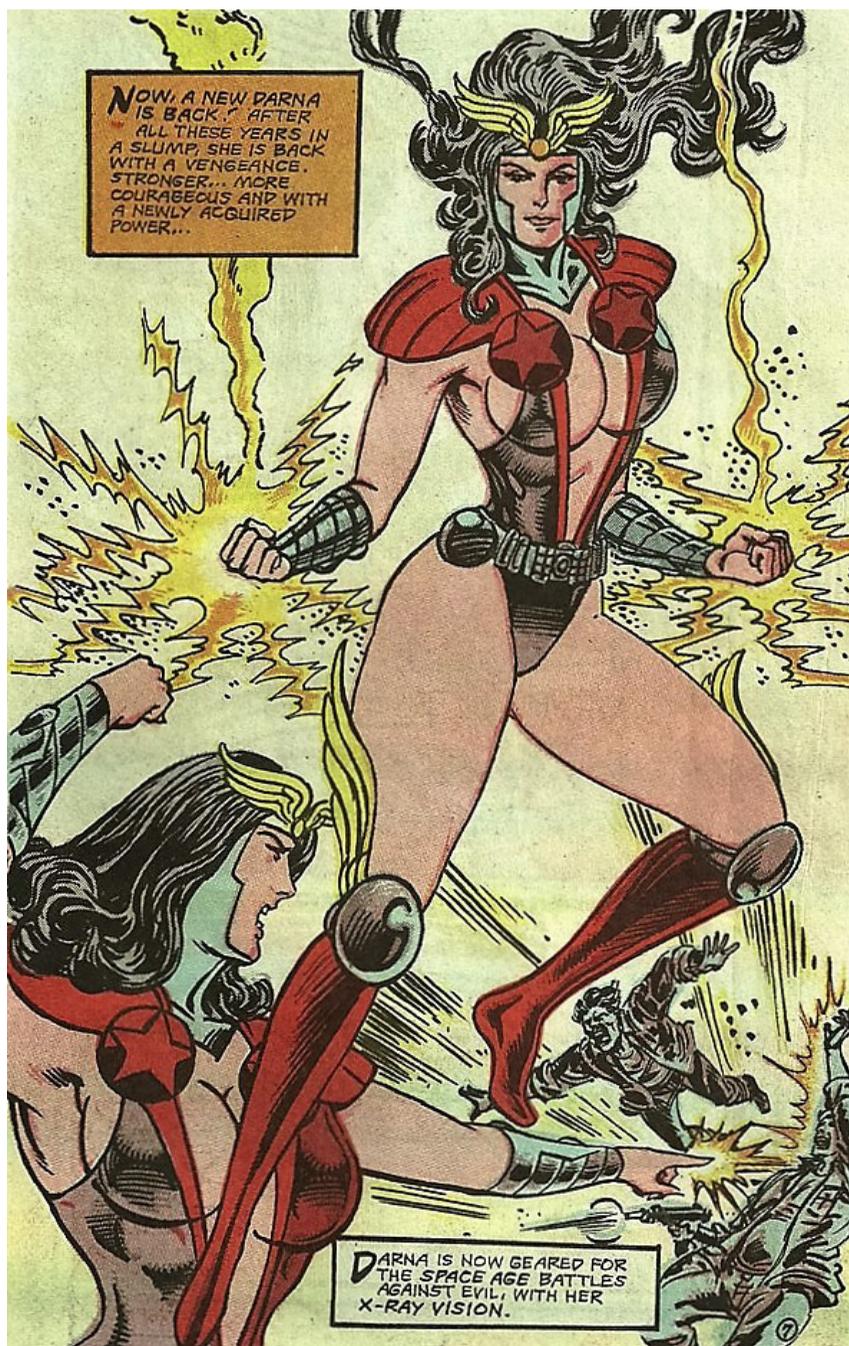
This is how Darna explains to Narda's grandmother what happens upon swallowing the stone:

Darna: *Huwag kayong matakot, Lola. Ako ay si Narda at kaya ako nagkaganito ay dahilan sa batong may agimat na aking nalunok. Ang bisa at kapangyarihan ng batong ito ay nananalaytay ngayon hanggang sa kaliit-liitang hibla ng aking katawan.* (Ravelo and Redondo 17)

(Don't be afraid, grandmother. I am Narda and the reason why I transformed is because of the power of the stone that I swallowed. The essence and power of this stone now flow to every corner of my body.)

In the first issue of Darna in *Pilipino Komiks* she was described as “*nagtataglay ng alindog ni Benus, kisig ni Apolo, at lakas ni Samson*” (possessing the charm of Venus, the elegance of Apollo, and the strength of Samson) (Ravelo and Redondo 14). In these earlier komiks stories, she has superhuman strength, the ability to fly, and is impervious to bullets. While strength and flying are obvious powers for superheroes, Ravelo's initial description of Darna's abilities is interesting as *kisig* (elegance or stature) and *alindog* (charm or beauty) are not typical descriptions of superhero powers. However, these descriptions of power can be found in our earliest epic heroes such as Labaw Donggon, Nagmalitung Yawa, Agyu, and Matabagka<sup>6</sup> (Brillón “Nagmalitung” 21). Further, according to Mina Roces, for women in Philippine society who were not previously given access to, and authority in the public and political spheres, the possession of beauty and charisma can be considered powers (17).

Darna's powers remained largely untouched during her earlier years. Even early movie adaptations closely adhered to the powers described in the komiks version. This changed around the early nineties as komiks and movies showed Darna with additional abilities such as X-ray vision, laser beams coming from her fingertips, and an invisible ray that comes from her now functional utility belt (see fig. 1). According to the komiks, this makes Darna more ready and prepared to battle space aliens (Medina 7), which at the time seemed to be in vogue with the popularity of alien villains in Western comic books such as Galactus and Thanos from Marvel Comics, as well as Brainiac and Darkseid from DC Comics.



**Fig. 1.** Darna acquired new powers when she was reintroduced in the nineties. Here she is shown having X-ray vision and with laser shooting out of her fingers and arms, from Lan Medina<sup>2</sup>; "Darna: The Legend Lives On"; *Super Action Komiks*; Atlas Publishing Company, 1998, [pinoysuperheroesuniverse.blogspot.com](http://pinoysuperheroesuniverse.blogspot.com).

Movies such as *Darna* (1991) and *Darna: Ang Pagbabalik* (*Darna: The Return*, 1994) introduced bracelets that can repel bullets similar to Wonder Woman and heat-vision similar to Superman. Meanwhile, in *Ang Pagbabalik*, aside from being the source of Darna's powers, the stone was also given other attributes such as the ability to restore Narda's memory and sanity and recover the youth of an aging Valentina, Darna's nemesis.

The 2003 Mango Comics showed Darna as having telepathic and psionic capabilities which she used to save people who fell under the thrall of Valentina's powers (Yonzon and Monsanto 8). On the other hand, the 2005 TV series added heat vision, freeze breath, and the medallions on her belt functioning as a *shuriken*—a Japanese-type weapon. These abilities and hi-tech gadgets were added to broaden Darna's appeal to an audience used to the spectacle that comes with the genre. However, these additional powers became a source of debate among Darna fans who lamented that they were just copied from other superheroes.

The next section illustrates how Darna's powers are rooted in the Filipino belief system and explains how it can serve as counter-discourse to the superhero genre as it relates to the existing literature on power.

### **Darna's Powers as Canonical Counter-Discourse in the Superhero Genre**

To some extent, how superheroes came to have or possess their powers requires a certain degree of suspension of disbelief. However, a superhero's extraordinary abilities and skills reflect what a particular society values as positive and ideal traits, and what people consider or interpret as signifiers of power.

Aside from interesting descriptions of Darna's powers as *kisig* and *alindog*, the origin and constitution of Darna's powers are familiar to Filipinos as they connect with our traditional beliefs in *agimat*, *sapi*, and *loob*. These concepts present us with an alternative and localized understanding of power as iconography, despite the myriad Western influences inherent in the superhero genre.

As explained earlier, Darna's stone is an *agimat* that comes from nature, but in order to activate it, one must utter the name engraved on the stone. On the one hand, Darna's power is highly influenced by that of Shazam, a popular Western superhero in the forties; their human alter-egos both need to utter the name of their superhero counterparts in order to transform (Brillon "Superhero" 120). But on the other hand, this is something that is also familiar to Filipino folk culture because in this case, the name Darna functions as an incantation that is almost similar to *orasyon*. Traditional *orasyon* found in *libreto* are written in Latin and

are meant to be whispered to invoke their powers. Mars Ravelo's original komiks storyline seems to hark back to this practice as Narda does not need to shout, but must only utter or mention the name Darna consciously in order to summon the otherworldly warrior (and vice-versa) (Ravelo and Redondo 15-16). However, Darna adaptations exploit the audio-visual nature of cinema and television, and portray Narda as needing to shout the name Darna as a way to spectacularize the transformation of the superheroine.

This is not the only change made in the original komiks storyline by various movie and television adaptations when it comes to Darna's invocation of her powers. In early Mars Ravelo stories, Narda only swallows the stone once and it becomes part of her essence, hence the connection to subo. However, according to Rex Ravelo, succeeding adaptations, especially the ones starring Vilma Santos, opted to have Darna spit out the stone to transform back to Narda to create drama and danger, which also means that Ding becomes the caretaker or keeper of the stone. Initially, only Narda has access to the stone; even though her grandmother and Ding know about its powers, they have to take every precaution not to reveal who the stone's owner is. They also cannot touch the stone because it would lose its efficacy. Danilo Jurado, the actor who portrayed Ding in the films, is familiar with stories and beliefs about agimat. He knows that he could not be the caretaker of the stone because it would lose its potency.

*Hindi pwedeng hawakan ang kapangyarihan ni Darna. Walang pwede. Ni hindi nga, wala nga nakakalaam na siya 'yon e. Ako lang ... maski kanino mo itanong. Hindi ba 'yong agimat, hindi pinapaalam 'yon?*

(You cannot touch the stone of Darna. No one was allowed. No one knows she's her. For me ... even if you ask the others. If you have an amulet, you don't let people know about it.)

The changes that were made to Darna's powers in the adaptations also provide an interesting counterpoint to the powers of Western superheroes whose powers can only be possessed or harnessed by them. In this regard, Darna's stone can also be used by other people and harnessed for other purposes. For example, in the 1991 *Darna*, the stone is a means for the main villain to gain more power to rule the world; while in the 2003 comics and 2005 TV series, the stone possesses the power to make people forget or erase memories about certain events. This implies that anyone can possess the stone, although there is a precondition to how it will work and how the powers can be maximized (this will be discussed later using the concept of loob). Again, this means that in contrast to the powers of some Western superheroes which are just inanimate objects and/or tools that can be harnessed

by their owners, Darna's stone is treated as a living entity with its own provenance and consciousness. The stone is an active agent in itself, able to choose how it will work and who shall wield it.

Aside from its materiality, what is also hardly looked into is the nature of Narda and Darna's duality which stems from the act of swallowing the stone. Perhaps because of the absence of copies of early Darna movies and the lack of a complete Darna komiks database, what has become ingrained in the public's consciousness has been Vilma Santos's version of Darna—which is now canon in all adaptations.

In this regard, it is important to note that before Vilma Santos's portrayal changed the original Mars Ravelo story, Narda and Darna used to be two different entities inhabiting a single corporeal body. In short, Darna is not a "costume" that Narda wears, but she is a whole different being—and that being is an alien warrior from the planet Marte. The uniqueness of Narda and Darna as two separate entities is relevant in the context of her "costume" since it is another important signifier of the Western superhero genre.

The connection between Darna's power and "costume" can be explained through *sapi*, a kind of spirit and bodily possession where one entity takes over the other until such time that the other is called again, which puts another twist on the local superhero genre. This is how Mars Ravelo narrates Narda's transformation after she swallows the stone:

*Naramdaman na lamang ni Narda na para siyang pumailanlang sa kalawakan ng isang laksa't isang bituin na nagsabog sa kalangitan.* (Ravelo and Redondo 15)

(Narda felt like she was thrown to the galaxy together with the stars in the sky.)

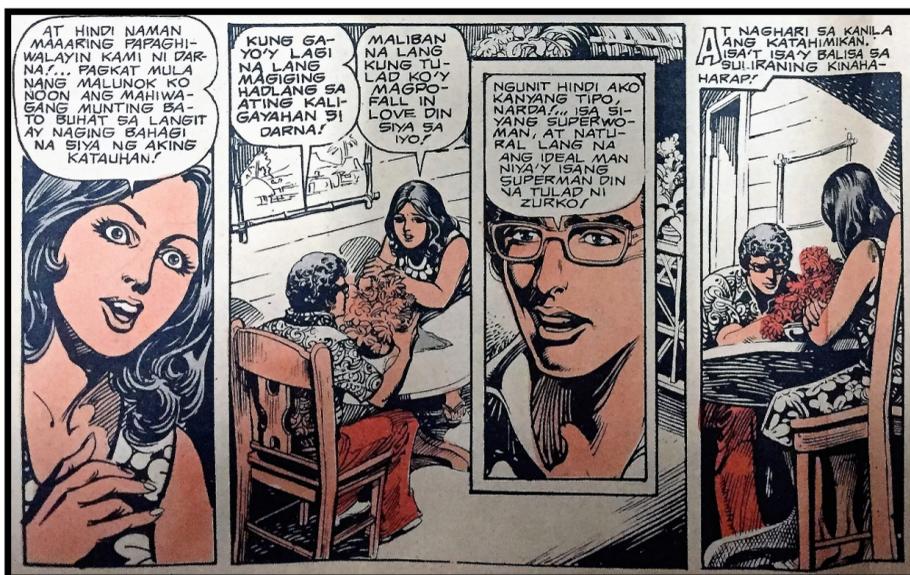
Afterwards, Ding and his grandmother find an unconscious Narda in the field. When they asked her what happened, she could not recall anything after Darna took over. This description of an out of body experience and blacking out is similar to the stories that Bulatao and Cannell describe in their studies.

In succeeding stories and adaptations, Darna's "possession" of Narda's body becomes more integrated that they basically become the same person. This is explained by an Angel (played by Vina Morales) who grants Narda's powers in the 1991 *Darna* movie:

Angel: *Ikaw ay hindi magiging ikaw. Makikilala ka bilang si Darna.*

(You will not be known as you. You will be known as Darna.)

However, Narda and Darna occupying one physical body also cause problems for both of them, with Narda sacrificing her personal life and romantic relationship as seen in “Darna at ang Time Machine” (Darna and the Time Machine) (see fig. 2). Here, Narda breaks up with her boyfriend, Santi, because Darna is nursing a broken heart after having been separated from Zurko, the man she loves. Narda tells Santi that Darna has already become a part of her, and the only way that they can be together is if Darna moves on from Zurko and falls in love with Santi. The komiks ends with Narda and Santi breaking up, with Santi realizing that Darna will always be a hindrance to their happiness.



**Fig. 2.** Narda and Santi talking about the implications of Darna sharing Narda's body on their relationship, from Mars Ravelo and Romy Santos; “Darna at ang Time Machine”; *Kampeon Komiks*, RAR Publishing House, 1977.

Spirit possession is definitely not a common explanation when set in contrast to Western superheroes who rely more on “alien” or “scientific” (as in science-based freak accidents) origins of powers. In addition, in the Western superhero genre, the mortal alter-ego and the superhero identity are the same person, not two different people having different feelings and wanting different lives. However, *sapi* is familiar to the Filipino psyche and as a frame of reference, sets Darna apart as a superhero since it has other notable implications when talking about power: the motivation of the entity possessing the mortal body and the alter-ego's agency.

Using Ravelo's origin story, Darna can be considered a disembodied, but conscious entity. In order to fulfill her mission as a superhero, she needs to inhabit a body.

By possessing Narda, Darna becomes corporeal. In this regard, Darna as a superhero subverts the negative, hysterical, and often exoticizing portrayals of *sapi* in mass media. Darna can be considered a good spirit who wants to help people by borrowing Narda's body as a vessel for doing heroic deeds. In a sense, Darna is also reflective of women's ties to the supernatural world, as reflected in the powers of *babaylan/baylan* and faith healers whose mortal bodies are used by spirits to communicate to the world of the living.

In terms of agency, Bulatao's and Fennell's description of *sapi* seems to imply that the person who is possessed by a spirit is just a passive receiver, subject to the whims and demands of the possessing entity. This is not the case for Narda since she can be considered an active agent because she was made aware of the situation and has accepted the advantages and disadvantages of being "possessed" by Darna.

Agimat and *sapi* are not divorced from the everyday experiences of Filipinos since these concepts stem from indigenous spirituality and belief systems and are part of what Covar calls *lihim na karunungan* (secret knowledge) (qtd. in Quintos 3). These concepts show how Filipinos live in and navigate both material (physical) and spiritual worlds. Western superheroes do not experience this easy negotiation of worlds as they always struggle to harmonize their public (superhero) and private (alter-ego) spheres; existential questions ranging from "what does it mean to be a hero," "why do we have heroes," and "why is it so hard to be a hero" become recurring themes in their narratives.

### **Loob, Agimat, and Sapi**

It is said that the key to strengthening all forms of *anting-anting* is to make oneself worthy through sacrifice, simple living, self-discipline, and self-control (Pambid 18)—in short, to cultivate the *loob* through purification of the self. The bearer of the *anting-anting* must possess the strength to make sure that he remains pure and noble despite his weaknesses and the temptations around him. Benedict Anderson notes that the practice of purifying and strengthening one's self in order to be worthy of possessing *anting-anting* is similar to some of the belief systems in Southeast Asia, in particular that of the Javanese of Indonesia, who practice simple living, meditation, sexual fasting, cleansing rituals, and other forms of sacrifices in order to retain the potency of amulets (qtd. in Lubang 12-13).

Darna's stories in movies and television constantly refer to *mabuting kalooban* and *kagandahang loob*. A noble or pure heart is an important prerequisite for the person who will become Darna's vessel. In *Planet Women*, Narda is portrayed as someone ready to sacrifice herself for the greater good that when she pleads for help, she is given Darna's stone:

*Diyos: Wag kang matakot Narda. Alam kong dakila ang iyong puso at malinis ang iyong kaluluwa kaya tutulungan kita. Ilahad mo ang iyong palad at may ibibigay ako sa'yo.*

(God: Do not be afraid Narda. I know that you have a pure heart and soul and that's why I will help you. Open your hand and I will give you something.)

This is also the case with 1991's *Darna* where Narda, during a game of hide and seek, hears the voice of an angel telling her that she is chosen to be the embodiment of goodness in the world.

*Angel: Sugo ako ng kabutihan, kalinisan, kagandahan, at kapayapaan at ikaw ang napiling kumatawan sa amin.*

(I am a messenger of kindness, purity, beauty, and peace, and you were chosen to represent us.)

Narda: *Ako?* (Me?)

*Angel: Wala kang bahid [ng] kasalanan. Sinasalamon mo ang lahat ng katangian [na] sinabi ko. Lalabanan mo ang lahat ng masasama.*

(You are innocent and without sin. You reflect everything that we stand for. You will fight all the evil in this world.)

In the world of *Darna* adaptations, mabuting kalooban, power, and destiny are all intertwined. It is said that the stone chooses the one who wields it. The 2003 comics articulate this connection:

*Darna: I'm afraid that choice is neither yours nor mine to make, Narda. You are me just as much as I am you. It is your destiny. Our destiny. (Yonzon and Monsanto 17)*

The 2005 TV Series also mentions how Narda, because of her mabuting kalooban, is worthy to wield the power of the stone.

*Aio: Iyo ito. Ikaw ang itinadhanang gumamit ng bato dahil sa iyong kabutihan. Tanggapin mo, huwag mong tanggihan. Darating ang panahon magkakat ang kasamaan sa mundo at ikaw ang magpapatuloy sa kabutihang itinaguyod ng Adranika. (2005 TV series, Episode 3)*

(This is yours. You are destined to use the stone because of your pure heart. Accept this. The time will come when evil will rule this world and you will be the one to uphold the goodness embodied by Adranika.)

Generally, most Darna adaptations operate on the notion that Narda is the rightful keeper of the stone, and she was chosen because she already possesses the purity of heart. In these stories, Narda is portrayed as a woman untainted by the weakness and frailties of humanity and as such, there is no more purification to be done because she is characterized as an inherently good person. While this definitely allows for a more action-packed and fast-paced storyline that looks good on screen and one that children will surely appreciate, it also neglects other important narrative facets of Narda and Darna's duality which can make for a more compelling and richly emotional journey towards heroism. This is perhaps what will make Darna more relatable, less perfect, and more vulnerable.

On the other hand, loob in Darna's universe also means *lakas* (inner strength) and *tatag ng kalooban* (endurance of spirit). *Ang Pagbabalik* and the 2005 TV series extend this by emphasizing *lakas* and *tatag ng kalooban*, rather than merely having a pure heart, as the more desirable traits of a superhero. Perhaps this shift has something to do with the context and tone of these movies. *Ang Pagbabalik* emphasizes *tatag ng kalooban* because Narda has to continue living despite the trauma and tragedy that befall her and her family.

The 2005 TV series tests Narda's capacity to endure and suffer, and in the process, she proves herself every inch the hero—whether as Narda or Darna. As the local soap opera structure requires, the narrative thrusts Narda into all kinds of injustices and challenges. In all these, there is always some kind of hard lesson to be learned, whether choosing between saving a child who is being kidnapped and her duties and responsibilities as a breadwinner (Episode 6); how her frustrations and impatience of living a dual life result in recklessness that had broad-ranging consequences for the world (Episode 44); or, understanding the reason behind Ding's death (Episode 55). In these adaptations, more than *mabuting kalooban*, what is emphasized are *lakas* and *tatag ng kalooban*—Narda's capacity to transcend her sufferings and become a stronger person.

However, perhaps reflecting Covar's duality of *labas* and *loob*, Darna stories have the tendency to automatically assign attributes such as *kagandahan* (beauty) and perfection (i.e., without any sign of physical deformity) to the person with *mabuting kalooban*. In turn, the person who has *masamang kalooban* is automatically denigrated as a villain, but this is not enough because they also have to be physically ugly or deformed. This harkens back to Ravelo's tendency to assign animal-like attributes to his villains<sup>8</sup>. Overall, including *loob* as part of the requirement of being a superhero gives a unique flavor to the Filipino superhero genre. However, some of the stories have the tendency to simplify and dichotomize good and evil leading to what is oftentimes a one-dimensional portrayal of heroes and villains.

To this end, Darna is an example of how even popular culture texts have a role to play in creating counter-discourse. Even as a product of the highly dominant and male-centric Western superhero genre, Darna's powers are actually transgressive and have the potential to subvert the narrative conventions of the genre which can lead to a reinterpretation of power in the symbolic realm and its connection to gender.

To illustrate, the belief around *agimat* indicates that it is buried together with the owner while *subo* can be transferred when the owner is on the verge of dying. The changes made by movie and television adaptations such as having Narda spit out the stone in order to transform also reconstitutes the idea of power as a responsibility and burden to those who possess it, because the stone can be transferred to the next person worthy (as seen in one's loob) of wielding its power.<sup>9</sup> In the final episode of the 2005 TV series, Narda, having done all she can as Darna, decides to become an ordinary individual. She throws the stone in the river with the hope that it will find its way to another worthy person (Episode 170):

Narda: *Ngunit kung ako ang papipiliin, alin nga ba ang mas matimbang, ang manatiling nasa kapangyarihan at responsibilidad o ang maging isang ordinaryo at normal na nilalang na lilimot sa lahat ng mga nangyari?*

(If I will be given the chance to choose, which decision has more weight? To stay in power and bear all the responsibilities or to become a normal person who will forget about everything?)

Aio (in a flashback scene): *liwan ko na sa'yo ang puting bato. Maaring gawin mo ang anuman gusto mo sa kapangyarihang taglay nito. Maaring humiling ka. Magmula ngayon, hawak mo ang desisyong ito.*

(I will leave the stone to you. You can do whatever you want with it. You can ask it for anything. From now on, you can make your own decisions.)

Narda: *Ngayon tapos na ang kaguluhan, panahon na upang magpahinga si Darna. Paalam Darna. Nawa'y malimot ko at ng lahat ng taong nakasaksi sa pagiging Darna ko ang lahat. Maalala nila si Darna ngunit hindi bilang ako. Kundi bilang isang nilalang na minsan ay dumating at naging tagapagtanggol. Ngunit mananatiling isang alaala. Isang simbolo ng kapayapaan at katarungan.*

(Now that the chaos is over, it is time for Darna to rest. Goodbye Darna. I hope that I will forget everything, and that people who knew me as Darna will also forget everything. They will remember who she is, but not as me. I hope she will be remembered as someone who came to protect them. I hope she will be remembered only as a symbol of peace and justice.)

In short, at least in the realm of symbolic representations, this idea of power's transferability provides a different way of interpreting power. If superheroes allow us to examine the nature of and our relationship with power (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 11), then Darna has proven that it can be shared with others. This is not the case for Western superheroes because their powers are theirs alone. Superman and Wonder Woman cannot pass on their abilities; Bruce Wayne will always be Batman and Tony Stark will always be Iron Man since no one can be as rich as they are; and Peter Parker cannot pass on his spider-like abilities to others.

As a final point, most studies show that *anting-anting* and *agimat* are traditionally wielded by men, resulting in a wholly male perspective on this practice. The absence of women in the discussion of *anting-anting* may be part of the traditional belief that an "amulet loses its powers when a woman touches it" (Lubang 23). Seen from this perspective, Narda's ability to wield the power of the stone becomes all the more subversive because she is given an *agimat*, and in the same manner, the space—as the superhero genre remains male-dominated—to exercise and practice this power despite denial and exclusion. To this end, Mars Ravelo and all the succeeding authors of Darna texts have given us our own modern myth, featuring a woman who can wield the *agimat* out of a traditionally long line of privileged male (epic or folk) heroes.

## Conclusion

According to Priscelina Legasto, postcolonial discourses include "imaginative" or "creative" writings that seek to establish alternative objects of knowledge and these "articulate the oppositional/interventionary as well as re-defined consciousness of peoples whose identities have been fragmented" (8). Even as Darna is now hailed in contemporary times as an embodiment of who we are as Filipinos, we cannot deny that she comes from a genre that is still highly associated with Western aesthetics and narratives, whose idealized notions of power are closely linked to men and masculinity. In a way, this article contributes to the "retrieval of alternative literary practices and the interrogation of prevailing colonialist systems of knowledge" (3). Darna is able to subvert prevailing canonical ways of thinking about power and illustrates how a superhero from the margins can carve out a space in contemporary popular culture discourses.

While there have been numerous studies about Darna, the nature of her powers and its connection to the Filipino belief system are hardly explored concepts. Looking at it now, even modern-day adaptations continue to emphasize *mabuting kalooban* and Darna's mission to achieve *katarungan* (justice). These are affirmations that despite outside influences, Darna continues to retain her attachment to Filipino folk culture. Moreover, *agimat*, *sapi*, and *loob* provide a more localized grounding and explanation for the origins of Darna's power and essence as a superhero and is vital to the wider discussion of the iconographies of the genre.

## NOTES

1. The following Darna komiks are cited in the study: “Darna” (1950-1951 issues), selected issues of “Darna and the Time Machine” (1977), “Darna: The Legend Lives On” (1998 issue), and “Darna” (Issues 1-3, 2003).
2. The following Darna movies are cited in the study: *Darna vs. The Planet Women* (1975), *Darna* (1991), and *Darna: Ang Pagbabalik* (1994).
3. The following episode numbers are included: 1-5 (April 4-8, 2005), 6-10 (April 11-15, 2005), 11-14 (April 18-21, 2005), 42-44 (May 20-22, 2005), 55-58 (May 31, June 1-3, 2005), and 170 (November 25, 2005).
4. Danilo Jurado played Ding in *Darna at ang Impakta* (Darna and the Monster), produced by People’s Pictures, and *Isputnik vs. Darna*, produced by Tagalog Ilang-Ilang Productions, both shown in 1963.
5. Bulatao also implies that since women are in touch with their emotions and with nature, it becomes a way for them to deal with traumatic situations that cannot manifest themselves in direct and tangible ways. According to Bulatao, *sapi* is used by local psychologists steeped in anthropology and cultural studies to explain a dissociative disorder where the human psyche splits into two or more personalities when triggered by a traumatic event or even a particular social expectation (415).
6. Labaw Donggon and Nagmalitung Yawa are characters from the epic *Humadapnon* by the Sulod people of Panay, while Agyu and Matabagka are powerful siblings in the Manobo epic entitled *Agyu*.
7. The authorship of “Darna: The Legend Lives On” under Lan Medina is based on Gregorio Apolonio’s list of Darna komiks. The copy that I acquired does not have author and illustrator details. See Apolonio, Gregorio R. III. *Darna Comics: A History of its Design 1947 to 2003*. 2005, University of the Philippines Diliman, College of Fine Arts, unpublished undergraduate thesis.
8. For another perspective on Mars Ravelo’s portrayal of female characters, refer to Edgar Calabia Samar’s “Ang Dalawang Halimaw ni Mars Ravelo, at Ilang Panimulang Talâ sa Pagbabasâ ng Komiks bilang Disiplina.” 2015, Rizal Library, Ateneo de Manila University. Professorial lecture.
9. However, the 2022 Darna TV series produced by ABS-CBN introduced the idea of the stone being transferred within bloodlines, from mother to daughter. This again has implications on how transfer of power is seen in local culture, similar to how Filipino political families bestow political posts to their children, thus paving the way for dynastic rule. In this regard, it is recommended that an in-depth analysis of this recent adaptation be done in order to explore how it treats Darna’s stone and how it reflects contemporary notions of power in Filipino society.

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**Cherish Aileen Aguilar Brillon** (cabrillon@up.edu.ph) is an associate professor at the University of the Philippines Diliman, College of Mass Communication, Department of Broadcast Communication. She finished her PhD in Philippine Studies, Tri-College Program at the UP Asian Center. Her research interests include political economy of media, gender, popular culture, and superhero studies.